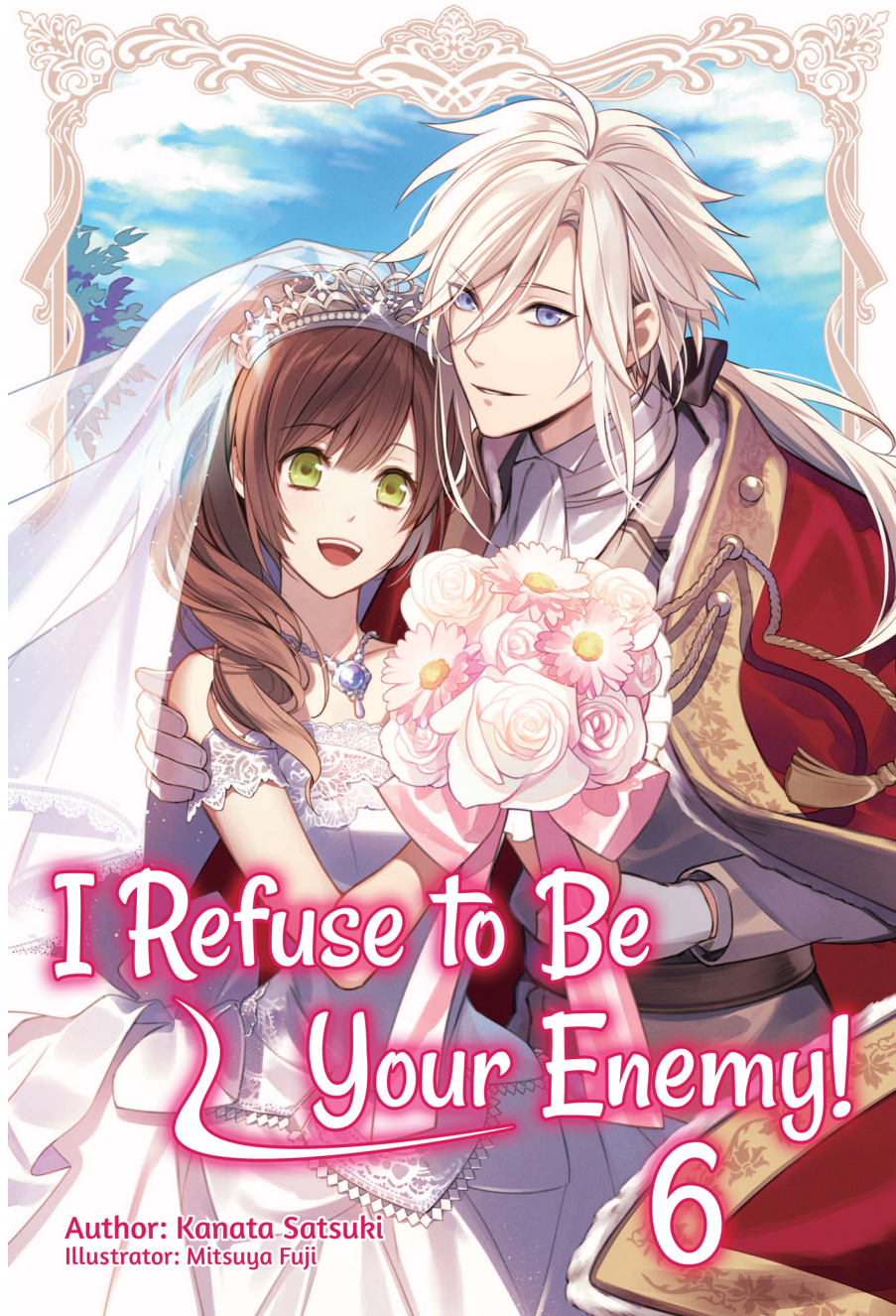


**I Refuse to Be
Your Enemy!
Volume 6**

Kanata Satsuki

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I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!

6

Author: Kanata Satsuki
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Character Introductions



Alan Évrard

The lively son of the margrave of Évrard, who manages the border between Farzia and Llewyne. In the game from Kiara's past life, *Farzia: Kingdom at War*, he was the protagonist. Deputy commander of the Farzian army.

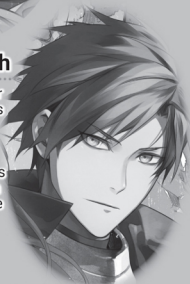


The resourceful prince of Farzia and the one leading the nation's forces against Llewyne. Commander-in-chief of the Farzian army. In Kiara's past-life memories, he was slain before the start of the game. At last, he has confessed his feelings for Kiara, which he harbored ever since he first took her under his wing.

Reginald Dias Farzia (Reggie)

Cain Wentworth

A knight serving under Alan, as well as Kiara's personal bodyguard. He lost his family in a war against Llewyne. Those emotional scars bred a dependence on Kiara, but he has since switched tracks to watching over her as a "brother" of sorts.



Kiara Cordier

Our protagonist, an earth spellcaster. When she was about to be forced into marriage, she realized that she had been reincarnated into the world of a game she'd played in her past life—and that she was on the path to dying a villain—and fled. Cue her meeting Reggie and the rest of our heroes. Much like in the RPG, the Kingdom of Llewyne invaded not long after, and she is now fighting as a spellcaster in the Farzian army.

Horace

Kiara's spellcasting mentor and father figure. He used to be a wind spellcaster, as well as a bug-eyed, withered old man. He lost his life, but thanks to forming a mentor-disciple contract with Kiara, his soul was able to live on inside a Jomon clay figurine.





The Farzian Royal Army

Emmeline Finard

The daughter of the current baron of Delphion. She is currently leading the soldiers of Delphion as a general.

Lila, Reynard & Sara

A group of three pale, fox-like monsters called frostfoxes kept by Gina. They can use ice magic.

Wayne Évrard

The margrave of Évrard. Alan's father.

Beatrice Lydia Évrard

Alan's mother, the wife of the margrave. Elder sister to the king of Farzia.

The Thorn Princess



A spellcaster with an eternally youthful appearance who is rumored to have lived in her forest for hundreds of years. She has aided our heroes time and time again, but her ultimate goal remains a mystery.

Girsch

A muscular mercenary with a mean sword arm. A woman at heart. The deputy leader and team mom of Gina's mercenary band, and a beloved friend of Kiara's.

Gina

A Salekhardian mercenary. A beast-tamer who employs the help of three frostfoxes. She used to be a Salekhardian noblewoman, but circumstances led her to join her mercenary band, and she is now under the employ of the Farzian army.

Faden Enister

The count of Enister. An old man with white hair and a beard to match. His trusty steed(?) is a giant white goat.

Jerome Limerick

Younger brother to the marquis of Limerick. One of Farzia's generals.

Groul

Captain of Reggie's royal guard.

Felix

One of Reggie's knight-guards.

The Salekhardian Royal Army

Mikhail

A lord-in-waiting from the Salekhardian royal palace. He works alongside Isaac.

Isaac



The king of Salekhard who took the throne by force. Though he had initially formed an alliance with Llewynne, he is now aiding the Farzian army after suffering a defeat at their hands.

Llewynne's Co-Conspirators

Marianne

Reggie's stepmother, the queen of Farzia. Born of Llewynne, she is aiding the Llewynian army's invasion of Farzia alongside the count of Patriciél.

Ada Forsén



Queen Marianne's lady-in-waiting. She ran off in the heat of the moment, only to be taken in by the viscount of Credias and turned into a spellcaster.

Viscount Credias

A Farzian nobleman and spellcaster. He is the man Kiara was originally supposed to marry. Slain by Reggie's hand in the Battle of Eirlain.

Count Owen Patriciél

A Farzian nobleman, but one who has held close ties to Llewynne for quite some time. Enamored with Marianne, he has aided the Llewynian invasion in accordance with her wishes. Formerly Kiara's adoptive father.





Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter 1: What the Thorn Princess Once Sought

Interlude: What Can I Do for You?

Interlude: And Thus Did They Meet

Chapter 2: The Assault on Fort Nazant

Interlude: A Sacrificial Bird

Chapter 3: Battle on the Sestina Plains

Chapter 4: The Thorn Princess and Her Memories

Chapter 5: To the Royal Capital

Chapter 6: The Final Battle

Final Chapter: A New Beginning

Side Story: The Happily Ever After Continues

Afterword

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Chapter 1: What the Thorn Princess Once Sought

In dire need of a respite after our victory at the Battle of Eirlain, we returned to Delphion Castle for a time. It was directly south of our current position, so the journey only took three days.

As soon as we arrived at the baron's castle, we dove right into a discussion of our strategy moving forward. The generals, Reggie's royal guard, and my own personal advisor—Cain—all gathered in the castle's council room.

"Immediately following the Battle of Eirlain, I spread the word to the rest of Farzia that Salekhard has joined under our banner, and the results have been everything we hoped for and more. We'll have all the reinforcements we could possibly need. Several of the noble houses that had previously been sitting on the fence have offered to send us more troops," said Reggie, flashing a small slip of paper that had been delivered to us by bird.

"Thus, my plan is to have the reinforcements waiting by the Delphion border march west and capture Kilrea. Is our other batch of soldiers ready to row out into the lake?" he asked, turning to Groul.

His knight nodded. "Yes. By now, they ought to have set out in the ship Llewynne left behind in Eirlain."

"Excellent. While we're waiting to hear from them, we should likewise set sail and head straight for the royal domain."

"You certainly aren't breaking them in gently," remarked Jerome, the middle-aged commander of the Limerick troops, a hint of pity in his eyes.

"Well, that *was* the basis of the Lady Spellcaster's proposal." Reggie glanced over at me.

Fair. I did say we should work them to the bone to reduce their postwar reparations.

"Besides, if we hope to placate the nobility over the events in Trisphede, we're better off foisting the more unpleasant work onto them."

Of course, the "them" we were referring to was Isaac's Salekhardian troops. We had arranged for them to make their way from Eirlain to the royal domain by boat. Their task was to wipe out the Llewynian forces stationed there ahead of our arrival. That way, we would be able to breeze straight through the royal domain and on

to Sestina.

Though I was the one who had originally proposed driving them like cattle, I'd assumed we would be crossing the lake together. The Salekhardians clearly hadn't expected to be thrown into enemy territory all on their lonesome either, since I recalled them boggling at the orders.

You're merciless, Reggie.

"Once we've arrived in the royal domain, we'll march west from the border with Kilrea to join up with our reinforcements. After that, we head out for Sestina."

The elderly Lord Enister voiced his concerns, stroking his white beard. "Do you think it's okay to leave our reinforcements with the Salekhardians?"

Our backup saw the Salekhardians as little more than enemy invaders. He was probably worried that they would be unwilling to work alongside their former foes.

"That won't be a problem. I've asked a former Farzian princess, Lady Évrard, to come lead the reinforcements."

"Lady Évrard? Really?" I blurted out, surprised.

Reggie smiled. "From the sound of it, the margrave has finally recovered from his injuries. Regardless, I was worried about sending him on such a long journey, and I heard that my aunt had been placed in charge of their new recruits, besides. Thus, I chose to hand command of the reinforcements over to her. The best woman for the job, don't you agree?"

"Considering her lineage and the status she used to have, the rest of the nobility will be in no position to defy her orders," asserted Alan, son of the woman in question.

Oh, I see, I thought.

Beside me, the daughter of Lord Delphion, Emmeline, had sparkles in her eyes. "Lady Évrard, you say?!"

Come to think of it, Emmeline *had* mentioned that Lady Évrard was something of an idol to her. No doubt she was dying to meet her.

After that, we were briefed on the current situation in the royal domain and Sestina. The information had come from the man leading a force of 2,000 soldiers from Tarinahaea, the home of one of Reggie's knight-guards. Evidently, the queen had not ordered the entirety of her forces to keep the royal capital surrounded; instead, she had split her army in two and dispatched about half of the men to Sestina. The soldiers were waiting there to ambush us, knowing we would have to pass through the province eventually.

It sounded like Reggie preferred to leave the royal domain for Salekhard to deal with and head straight through to Sestina.

While I listened in on the discussion, I thought back to the section

of the RPG that took place in the royal domain—or more specifically, the mission to find the item needed to recruit the Thorn Princess.

What's Reggie planning to do about that? I wondered. Even with Lord Credias gone, there was no telling what the future had in store for us. Having the Thorn Princess in our party would definitely give us a little extra peace of mind.

Whatever the answer, a week later, we would be setting sail from a port not far from the baron's castle.



This was my first time ever setting foot on a ship in this world. Evidently, it was going to take a total of five days to reach the royal domain by boat. It wasn't all that far, but the lack of a tidal current meant the journey would span multiple days regardless. Our soldiers were split up between the Delphion ships and the ship carrying the Tarinahaea reinforcements Reggie had called upon.

Shortly after our departure, Alan got seasick.

"Wow. You're such a wild child that I never imagined you'd have trouble with boats," I commented.

"Who are you calling a wild—urp!" Alan gripped the railing and leaned over the side of the deck, deathly pale as he stared down at the surface of the water.

"I just always got the sense that you were most in your element outdoors. It's easy to imagine you tearing up the town, like, climbing trees or picking fights with stray dogs."

"When did I ever tear—hurp!"

"I was mostly kidding about that part. Still, I always see you riding off somewhere on a horse, and rumor has it that you even mounted Lila after she'd grown a few sizes. I was sure you'd do fine on a boat, no matter how hard it shakes."

I'd figured his inner ear would have been trained for this sort of thing, so I was pretty surprised.

"How come it isn't getting to *you*?" Alan asked, shooting a baleful glance my way.

Now that he mentioned it, I had to wonder the same thing. "Good question. Why *isn't* it?"

"It's all that time you've spent riding your golem. It rocks back and forth even more violently than a ship. Now that you've grown used to that, you can handle just about anything," posited Cain, who had come over looking for me. "So this is where you were hiding, Miss Kiara."

"I figured I might as well take advantage of the cruise and go get a look at the scenery."

"That's all well and good, but let's give Lord Alan some space."

From the look of it, it's taking everything he has just to keep this conversation going." Cain gave him a sympathetic glance.

Alan threw his hands over his mouth, looking the most ashen he had yet.

"Let's, ah, allow him to retch in peace," his knight urged. Alan seemed to agree with that suggestion, waving his free hand at us in a shooing motion.

He did, indeed, appear to be at his limit. Scolding myself for being such a busybody, I started walking off. "I thought talking might make for a good distraction, that's all."

"I believe medicine would do the job better."

Chester walked over to Alan with something in his hand. Either a canteen or medicine, I figured. If that did the trick, he'd hopefully be feeling better in no time.

Still, I thought, the way Cain interrupted my well-intentioned pestering and dragged me away really had an "older brother" vibe to it. I burst out giggling.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking about what a good big brother you are to Alan."

A surprised look passed over his face, which quickly shifted into a wry smile. "I suppose so. I've had my hands full with a certain little sister as of late, but Lord Alan will always be that younger brother I have to keep a close eye on." He then gave me a couple of light pats on the head. "In any case, sister of mine... I came looking for you because we received news I knew you'd want to hear."

"Huh? What news?"

"It's from the Salekhardian army."

It seemed we'd finally received word from Isaac following his infiltration of the royal domain.

"They sent us a message by bird. It seems they've landed in the royal domain safely."

Not only had they "borrowed" the armor from a slew of Llewynian soldiers, but they had taken Llewyn's ship the long way around and pretended to be coming from the direction of the royal capital. The soldiers stationed in the royal domain had welcomed Isaac's men into the port, swallowing their lies about having been sent in preparation for the Farzian army's arrival. With their enemy's guard successfully lowered, the Salekhardians had swiftly retaken the fort on the shore.

I was relieved to hear that catching Llewyn off guard meant they had made it through with only minimal casualties.

"The survivors will be sure to spread the word before long, so it's a trick that only works once. Still, not many would have what it takes

to pull off the first time. I must say I'm impressed." Cain praised the effort, much to my surprise.

When the lords or nobles they served were away, knights would sometimes take up command of their armies. It was a very different role from your ordinary soldier. Alan and Reggie would occasionally leave their troops in the hands of their knights, too.

Cain was one of those potential candidates. That meant he knew just how difficult it was to mobilize an army and win a battle. And here he was, complimenting the man who had come within spitting distance of killing him once.

"Is something the matter?"

"I was just surprised. I think it's pretty big of you to speak so highly of someone you hate," I answered honestly.

Cain flashed me a rueful smile. "I have no problem speaking well of those who pull their weight. This war against Llewyrne isn't one we can afford to lose."

I see. Basically, even if he hurts himself on a tool, as long as it does the job, that won't stop him from either using it or singing its praises.

"I'm more surprised to see how little you seem to resent him, considering he took you captive amid that mess," he shot back.

I debated how to answer that one. "It's a little rough to think back on how many Farzians he hurt, or how he almost killed you. Still, it's just as true that he's bailed me out time after time."

I couldn't write him off over one transgression.

"When I heard what you said, I realized that it would benefit us more to work *with* him, and so I was better off putting all that behind me."

"Benefit us how?"

"Thanks to all of Isaac's hard work, you won't have to throw yourself into danger quite as often. That's a big win for us, don't you think?"

Cain blinked. "Does my safety... seem like a 'big win' to you, Miss Kiara?"

I was taken aback by his question. "What? Of course! It means Alan and Reggie will be less likely to slip up, and most importantly of all, there isn't anyone else out there who would be so good at predicting my next move and looking after me. Besides... if something happened to you, *I* might not be able to fight on, either."

Back when I was in Isaac's custody, worried though I had been, I still had hope that Cain had made it out okay. That was all that had kept me going. If I'd been told that he really had died back there, I wouldn't have had the strength to push myself so hard. Even with the Thorn Princess's aid, even with Ada's help, I would have written off the situation as hopeless.

Cain gave a small laugh.

“Besides, I *was* pretty mad, so I gave him a few kicks for good measure. If you had died back then, I would have done a lot worse to him than that.”

“You *kicked* the king of Salekhard?”

I nodded. “Uhh... how many times was it, again? I got one last hit in when Reggie showed up to rescue me, too.”

I’d kicked him a bunch, and I recalled stomping on his foot, too.

Ugh, now I’m thinking about the time he kissed me. Still, I decided to let him off the hook for that, since I knew it was just a ploy to make me realize my true feelings. Though, uh... hold on a second. Why is Isaac always so quick to throw himself under the bus and play the villain, anyway?

We spent the entire voyage in that relatively laidback manner. Eventually, Alan got over his seasickness, and the rest of the trip went smoothly enough.

Three days later, we docked at the port of the royal domain.



Isaac was waiting for us on the shore. He greeted Alan and Reggie first, then called out to me when he spotted me standing behind them. “Ho there, Kiara!”

The ease of his greeting took me back to our encounters in Cassia and Fort Inion, and I found myself falling back into our old dynamic. “I’m glad to see you alive and kicking. You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“Oho, were you *worried* about me? Come now, I was the one doing the ambushing, so there was no chance I was going to lose.”

“Still, there’s always the risk you could get hit by a stray arrow.”

“I’m the king, lest you forget. My men take the utmost care to prevent that from happening.”

Seeing Isaac laugh off the possibility so nonchalantly was enough to convince me. Reggie *was* always tightly guarded himself, so what he was saying checked out.

Reggie clapped a hand on the king’s shoulder just as he was about to go on talking. “Care to explain the current state of affairs, Lord Isaac? I’d appreciate it if you would give us a tour of the fort, while you’re at it.” *Technically* he was smiling, but there was an ominous gleam in his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” came Isaac’s smooth reply, a grin on his face. “Trying to keep me away from Kiara?”

“Given your previous offenses, can you blame me?”

His retort made my heart leap in my chest. I’d been doing my best not to think too hard about our history, treating it as water under the bridge... but hearing Reggie bring it up filled me with guilt.

“Nobody likes a petty man.”

“Then perhaps you should endeavor not to bring out the spite in me. Come here, Kiara.”

Seeing as it was Reggie calling for me, I trotted over obediently. He immediately grabbed hold of my hand.

“Huh?”

Wait just a second! I didn't expect him to pull that in front of such a big crowd!

Groul didn't seem to mind it, however, and the rest of the knights hardly batted an eye. Even Alan had ignored us to go talk to a Salekhardian general, so the only ones sneaking glances our way were the rank-and-file soldiers off in the distance.

I was too scared to look behind us and see what sort of face Cain was making.

Reggie, meanwhile, wasn't bothered in the slightest. “Given my role as her keeper, it's only natural that I'd have a say in who gets close to her. Now, why don't you show us inside?”

With a roll of his eyes, Isaac began leading the way.

Reggie refused to let go of my hand throughout the whole walk to the fort. There were Salekhardian soldiers lined up near the entrance and in the courtyard, so I had to wonder what they thought when they saw me trailing a step behind him.

This is SO embarrassing.

Even so, I never attempted to free myself from his grasp. I wanted to hold on to him for as long as I could.

Reggie finally let go of my hand once we had entered the fort. The moment he did, he leaned over to whisper into my ear, “Of course, if I *really* had my way, I wouldn't be letting you go.”

Perhaps that was what kept me from feeling too sad when he pulled away. It was at times like this that I could have sworn he could read my mind.

The one whose reaction I'd been most concerned about—Cain—simply said, “It was an effective security measure. Best not to let it get to you.” Apparently that was how he'd chosen to interpret the gesture. Good.

Once we were inside the fort, we jumped into a briefing on the current situation, followed by a discussion of our next move.

Immediately upon his capture of the fort, Isaac had sent scouts out into the royal domain—still clad in Llewynian uniforms, of course. According to the reports of the ones who had come back, the former magistrate had been assassinated by an underling of Lord Patriciél prior to the invasion. The majority of soldiers who had been stationed there had been pulled to the west in preparation for the showdown in Sestina.

The royal domain's other fort—the one that wasn't anywhere near the lake—had supposedly been occupied by a mix of Lord Patriciél's personal army and Llewynian troops.

"There's one other area of interest," Isaac reported, looking a little lost at his own account. "There's a manor surrounded by a rampart, which Lord Patriciél's soldiers have been spotted coming in and out of. With considerable frequency, might I add... well, until just recently. Oh, and that spellcaster you two slew? He dropped by for a visit once, too."

"Lord Credias, too?" I murmured.

"It's right here." Isaac pointed to a spot on the map the Farzians had given him.

I recognized the location immediately. It was where you found the item required to recruit the Thorn Princess in the RPG.

Lord Credias had been spotted wandering in and out of there. Lord Patriciél's soldiers, too. What could it all mean? I knew that the royal family had some sort of secret pact with the viscount. What I didn't understand was where Lord Patriciél came into the picture.

To be fair, I didn't know the particulars of how the viscount had joined the queen's side, either. Even amid all those dreams of the life where I was destined to die, I'd never heard an explanation for that one.

Perhaps we could make some sort of breakthrough if we looked into it. It seemed highly likely that the queen and her lackeys were hiding something there, too.

"There's nobody left there now, so we haven't bothered with it yet."

"I see," Reggie muttered, then glanced over at me. Considering Lord Credias was involved, he must have deemed this a decision for the spellcaster.

"Um, I'd like to go there and investigate. There are too many things we don't know about the queen and her accomplices' dabblings in magic. We might be able to find a hint to unravel the mystery there."

Reggie nodded. "Alright. Permission granted."



We set out the very next day. In hopes of making it to the royal villa and back as quickly as possible, we were accompanied only by a small, elite squad. It was the same group we had brought with us to go see Ernest in Delphion. There were about fifty men in addition to Reggie and Cain, plus a Salekhardian guide, and that was it.

Alan's troops began marching south alongside the Salekhardian army. The plan was to join up with them once we'd finished our

business at the manor.

It took us a full day's horseback ride to reach our destination. We slept outside the first night, then arrived the following day.

Cain stood watch over me while we were camping, as was his custom. Of course, he took shifts with other soldiers, so he didn't have to stay awake for *that* long; besides, I was well aware that the sooner I got up, the easier it would be on the people guarding me, so I was always careful to keep early hours.

For some reason, I woke up much earlier than usual on that particular day. I couldn't get back to sleep afterward, so I decided to go for a walk around the camp in the creeping light of daybreak.

Cain had an even better idea. On his recommendation, I erected an earthen tower even taller than the surrounding trees, and together we climbed up to the very top of it. The sun wasn't out just yet, but the sky was already turning a faint blue. Below the horizon, I could see the hills gently rolling toward the lake, and trees dotting the landscape around it.

While I was gazing off into the distance, Cain said, "Once you're done here, we can let the others use this as a lookout tower. Best to leave it up for a while."

"Oh, alright."

"Just remember to take it down before we head out."

Moments later, he exhaled a soft breath.

"What's wrong? Are you not feeling well?" I asked, sensing something was off about him.

Cain was nothing if not resilient. If he was sighing over nothing in particular, I had to assume he was either just that exhausted, or else feeling under the weather.

"No, it's not that." He placed a hand atop my head, much like he would a child's. "When I look out into the distance from so high up, it feels like the whole world is laid out before me—and my own troubles start to feel trivial in comparison. Then again, I never would have thought that way in the past."

Is he worried about something?

While I was debating whether or not it was a good idea to ask, he went on, "I'm just a greedy man, I'm afraid. I don't want to lose anything. It's like how when a plate is chipped, it's hard not to look at it and wish it was whole. When I lost my family, I couldn't even think about moving forward again. It was the time I spent with you that made me realize how I'd been acting."

"I think that's a natural reaction to getting hurt, though. There's nothing wrong with it."

Anyone would be sad after losing their family. It was only after they had time to heal and chances to meet new people that the pain

would slowly but surely begin to fade.

“Yes, I agree with you now. I’m sure the old me would have seen it as a failing, however.” Cain glanced over his shoulder at me, smiling. “Still, there are things to be gained from rushing blindly ahead. It’s precisely because I never questioned myself that I could strive wholeheartedly toward refining my combat skills. And so... if there’s something you feel you must do for someone else’s sake, Miss Kiara, I think you should act on those instincts—regardless of how anyone else might feel about it, or what the consequences could be.”

“Sir Cain...?”

“You’ve managed to sprint this far ahead because you knew what the future held in store. Yet you haven’t done much to follow your own heart.”

“You don’t think so?”

I’d always seen myself as the type to do whatever she pleased, so I had to tilt my head at that assessment. Cain only replied, “If you don’t understand what I’m getting at, that’s alright. Apologies for bringing that up out of nowhere. Every now and then, watching you and His Highness dance around each other makes me want to give you a little brotherly advice.”

“What’s more,” he continued, “if you’ve decided who you need beside you to move forward, I won’t protest no matter whom you choose. Either way, it will always be my duty to protect you. I only ask that you don’t forget that.”

He bid me a short farewell, then headed back down to the ground without me.

“Huh...? What was that all about?”

Did he say all that because he figured out how I feel?

I hadn’t talked to anyone about it. I was pretty sure Reggie had figured it out for himself, but it wasn’t as if I’d been snuggling up to him in plain sight.

Cue Master Horace, who had been keeping quiet like a good little figurine. “Bet he knows you’ve got the hots for that prince. You’re terrible at keeping your feelings under wraps. Heeheehee!”

“I am?”

“Oh, I can tell you’re *trying* to be subtle about it. But if you really think about it, the hints are still there—like you two sleeping together and whatnot.”

“C’mon, I wasn’t even *awake* for that.”

I’d only learned after the fact, courtesy of Gina, that he had climbed into bed with me every now and then just to mess with me. I’d been so shocked by the news that I thought I was going to have a heart attack.

Gina, on the other hand, hadn’t seemed the least bit perturbed,

and I couldn't comprehend why she was just taking this in stride. When I'd asked her, she had simply grinned and replied, "Well, I'm confident His Highness wouldn't take things *too* far."

While I was thinking back on the events, Master Horace saw his opportunity to poke some fun at me. "Well, it all started 'cause *you* kept grabbing hold of the prince's hand. Or sometimes his sleeve. Your knight must have caught a glimpse of that, too. Ohohoho!"

"Ugh..."

Considering how often Cain stayed by my side, it was only natural he would have seen it happen. That explained that, then.

Master Horace was clearly thinking along the same lines as I was, given what he said next. "If you ask me, seems like that knight of yours has come to terms with his feelings—with the pain of losing his family, that is. And since he views you as a sister, it's probably given him some peace where *you're* concerned, too."

I hoped he was right. If nothing else, I wanted Cain to find some closure where his family was concerned. Anything so he wouldn't have to agonize over them forevermore.



At last, we arrived at our destination. The manor itself was three stories tall, which was about the scale you would expect from a royal villa. There were bound to be around fifty rooms, give or take.

The U-shaped building was surrounded by the same sort of impregnable walls that were built to defend cities from monster attacks. Given that it had a lookout tower, too, this place had likely been a fort once upon a time.

Reggie agreed with my theory, adding, "This place was once a fort owned by the House of Patriciél, no doubt."

In the past, the House of Patriciél had ruled over what was now considered its territory, as well as a chunk of the royal domain to the north. Given how deep their ties were to the Kingdom of Llewyn, however, they had committed an act close to treason in a previous war. Half of their territory had been confiscated as a result.

I see. So they built the royal residence in one of those forts.

To get the ball rolling, we started by taking a look in the tower. There were signs that Lord Credias and his men had used it recently.

"There don't *seem* to be any monsters around. Were they hiding something valuable enough to stand watch over, then?" I mumbled to myself.

"The first thing that comes to *my* mind is an experiment," Master Horace replied.

"Experiment? What kind of experiment?"

"Just think about it; it'd have to be research unfit for the public

eye, and Lord Credias is a spellcaster. I'm sure you can put two and two together. Mmheehee!"

That comment got the gears turning in my head. If he'd been working to manufacture defective spellcasters in this mansion, that would be plenty of reason to stand guard and make sure no one got too close.

"But according to Isaac's intel, there wasn't anything out of the ordinary here."

"If it was some of his Salekhardian knights that he sent, I doubt they were looking around for traces of a magical experiment. It would be much easier for those of us in the know to find the evidence they didn't manage to hide," Reggie suggested from beside me.

Ah, that makes sense. This is where the item the Thorn Princess asked for was hidden.

I had no idea what connection *she* had to this place, but perhaps there was leftover evidence of Credias's defective spellcaster experiments in the same hiding spot.

"Let's check inside, then."

"Where should we focus our efforts?" Reggie asked, hoping to use my memories as a reference for our search.

"The item is in a room on the second floor... over in the right wing, if memory serves."

"What's in there? A hidden door, or something else of the sort?"

I shook my head. "No. It's buried in one of the walls."

"Really now?"

I couldn't blame him for looking so perplexed, but those were the facts. "The room doesn't particularly stand out from the rest. Most of it is a little bit burnt or ruined, but that's all I've got."

When we stepped inside the manor, I saw that the building was in about the same shape it had been in the game. There was a big hole in the wall of the entrance hall. A chandelier had fallen from the ceiling, leaving broken glass and candles scattered all over the floor.

"It looks like all hell broke loose when they vacated the premises," commented Felix, who had come along with us.

Reggie nodded. "Given the extent of the damage, I'm guessing there *were* defective spellcasters involved. Brick walls don't break so easily."

"Let's stay on our guard. Though they let those Salekhardians grunts be, there's always a chance they laid some sort of trap for *you*, Your Highness."

While Groul ordered his soldiers to tighten the perimeter as much as possible, we headed to the second floor.

The state of the rooms hadn't been shown in much detail in the RPG; it appeared they had been wrecked in much the same way as the

entrance hall, however, which matched up with their brief description in the game text. We split up to scour the rooms, but we were having trouble finding anything of note.

We took a short break, then resumed our search.

"It's somewhere in a corner... A corner..." I conducted my search, mumbling the information I'd already shared with Reggie and his knights to myself all the while.

I checked all four corners of the room I was in, but failed to find anything there. As I stood there scratching my head, my eyes were suddenly drawn to a part of the wall near the large, wooden bed.

The walls of the room were plastered, but all manner of stains and scrapes had been left in the wake of the destruction, making it difficult to tell which parts had been painted over. This one section, however, was completely untouched—perhaps because the bed had taken the damage in its stead. To me, it seemed *less* likely that something would be hidden in a part of the wall too easily broken and laid bare.

"If it's plaster, my earth magic *should* work on it."

I peeled away the plaster by transforming it into sand. As soon as I had, a small trinket plopped down atop the pile of white dust. Whatever it was, it had been stowed away into the wall and painted over.

"You think this is it?"

"Must be," Master Horace said.

Cain came over as soon as he heard our exchange. "Did you find it?"

"I think so. It has to be these."

There were *two* items I held out to show to him. One was a cameo, a crest engraved upon it and an old, red ribbon tied around it. The other was a blackened silver ring with no gemstone.

That was all I'd found there, but this cameo was indeed the item Alan had found and given to the Thorn Princess in the RPG. I'd always assumed it was some keepsake of hers.

"This crest, though..." Even in my daze, I recognized the symbol.

Cain must have been even more familiar with the crest than I was; he knew what it was immediately. "That's the crest of the House of Patriciél. And this..." He picked up the ring and checked it over, his brow furrowing. "Let's show these to His Highness straightaway."

He and I asked the soldiers who were with us to run off and report back to Reggie, then headed back down to our meeting place in the entrance hall.

The first person to come down the stairs was Groul, who had been conducting his own search. He was holding two thin notebooks in his hand, a dour look on his face. Clearly he had found something of

interest, but I somehow doubted there was anything pleasant written in there.

Reggie showed up not long after. We gathered our party's VIPs in a banquet hall on the first floor, one of the relatively more unblemished rooms.

"Well then, why don't we have everyone report on what they found? You first, Kiara."

I mentioned what I'd found, and Cain handed both the ribbon-adorned cameo and ring over to Reggie.

"The crest of the House of Patriciél, I see. I have no idea how old this is, but I suppose this means one of the count's own relatives was used as a sacrifice."

That was what I'd figured, too. The only person I could imagine owning a trinket with that crest would be someone from the House of Patriciél.

Reggie, his knights, and Cain must have already suspected that part; none of them looked particularly surprised by the revelation.

When Reggie took a look at the *ring*, however, the look on his face changed. "Good God!"

Despite his apparent shock, Reggie didn't say anything more on the matter.

That was when Groul passed along the two notebooks he'd found. One of them had been opened to a certain page.

"I believe... this is a list of the victims of Lord Credias's experiments."

"They left that here?"

"It was left inside one of the rooms that was burned down. Perhaps they were confident it had been destroyed in the flames and didn't bother to check. For whatever reason, the desk in which this notebook was stored survived the fire. Please take a look at the page I turned to, Your Highness."

Groul pointed to a certain line. When Reggie's eyes passed over it, for a fleeting moment, a deep frown overtook his face—though he reverted back to his normal demeanor almost instantly.

"Quite a few of these names sound like they belong to royalty. There are a couple entries with no names at all... Children who were never properly christened, perhaps. Their ages are written next to them."

"These few pages seem to be a compilation of old records. He doesn't seem to have killed dozens of women in a terribly short span of time, at least. The more recent records of the women he kidnapped, presumably, are kept in the other notebook. I must warn you, most of it is chicken scratch," Groul explained, shutting the book Reggie was reading and passing it over to one of the other knights.

“From what I can tell, all those names belonged to close descendants of either the royal family or the House of Credias. It was about twelve years ago that the House of Patriciél came into the picture. Efia Patriciél... I have to assume she was a relative of the count, as well as the owner of that cameo.”

“Considering the trinket the Lady Spellcaster found, it seems Lord Patriciél had some sort of connection to the both of them,” Groul posited.

Reggie nodded.

It was then that one of the notebooks got passed around to Cain. When he looked it over, a troubled groan escaped his lips. Had he seen the name of someone he knew?

“What’s wrong, Sir Cain?” I asked in a whisper.

He handed the notebook over to me. That probably meant one look would be enough to tell me the issue.

While I was flipping through it, Reggie said to Groul, “After the last war with Llewyrne, no matter how close the House of Patriciél was to the Llewyrnian nobility, I always *had* thought it strange that the negotiations were left in their hands. The count from only a generation prior had fallen out of the king’s favor due to his collusion with Llewyrne. And yet, once my grandfather’s generation rolled around, he was suddenly welcomed with open arms. Now, I believe I finally understand the reason behind it.”

“What do you mean?”

“The count of Patriciél lost his wife. She was a relative of the duke’s and a descendant of the royal family. She also wasn’t in the best of health, so she supposedly passed away about twelve years ago. Yes... I see what happened here.”

Reggie seemed to have put some pieces of the puzzle together. I had Cain keep turning the pages for me, and we finally arrived at the passage in question. There was the name “Efia Patriciél,” along with her age: twelve years old.

“Efia...”

Her mother was a member of the royal family. She was twelve. And most tellingly, she knew where the cameo had been hidden.

“Then the Thorn Princess might be this girl named Efia,” I murmured aloud.

“Yes; there’s no doubt about it,” Reggie agreed.

Silver hair was a mark of royalty, but the trait became less common in second-generation branch families. In the third generation Efia had been born in, however, it seemed the probability of inheritance was much higher.

“That explains her hair color, at least. But if the Thorn Princess has a personal attachment to an item hidden in this building, and it

wasn't even something that old... it seems likely that she is not, in fact, a witch who has lived for hundreds and hundreds of years, but a mere child who was made into a spellcaster."

"But she doesn't look like she's aged a day since she was twelve. Is that sort of thing really possible?" I asked, looking down at where Master Horace sat in my lap.

"She *is* a spellcaster. There's no telling what kind of power she has, so I wouldn't be surprised if she *could* manage it somehow. Besides, she's never stepped out of her forest, has she?"

"Supposedly."

"It's possible that she sequestered herself away in that forest to hide from Lord Credias, the man who turned her into a spellcaster, then spread her own rumors about how she's lived there for hundreds of years."

Reggie nodded in agreement. "Then I suppose she really *is* a child by the name of Efia."

That would make her like something of a stepsister to me, considering who my adoptive father was. Was that why she was always so kind to me?

While I pondered that over, my gaze wandered back down to the book. This time, my eyes were drawn to the name written under Efia's, and I blinked in surprise.

I had the feeling I'd heard that name somewhere before.

There was nothing but a woman's first name written there: "Linese." Her age was twenty-four. Something seemed strange about it, considering most of the other names belonged to either aristocrats or members of the House of Credias.

The one most likely to raise a fuss over Efia being turned into a spellcaster would have been her mother. If her mother had died twelve years ago, it was likely sometime after that that she had been made into a mage.

Twelve years ago. Reggie had been five years old at the time, so there was a chance he knew a thing or two about the state of the royal family back then.

That was when I recalled both Reggie's brief look of shock, as well as the loved one he had coincidentally lost at the same age. Her name was...

I couldn't help glancing over at Reggie.

"In any case, we've found what we were looking for. Let's assume it's Lord Credias's fault that the Thorn Princess has been slow to act and liable to vanish just as soon as she makes an appearance; if we inform her of his death and offer this trinket to her, she may be willing to work with us. Let's send out a messenger once we've joined back up with Alan."

Reggie ended the conversation there and rose to his feet.

“We’re better off staying here for the night,” Groul said, a look of concern on his face. “Some of the rooms are in better shape than others. Let’s use those and get some proper rest. Better to have a roof over our heads than to set up camp outdoors.”

“You have a point. Very well, then.” Reggie nodded.

Felix immediately followed up by suggesting to me, “Perhaps because there wasn’t anything of value inside, the servant’s room on the third floor was left largely untouched. I have other matters to attend to, so would you mind waiting there with His Highness until dinnertime?”

Cain seemed to think that was a good idea as well. He and Groul entrusted me with the notebook, then ushered me and Reggie up to the third floor.

I knew exactly why everyone was doing this: they were worried about Reggie. Of course, he couldn’t show his true feelings before his own subordinates, so they had left him in my hands instead.

“Nothing to do but seclude ourselves out of everyone’s way, I suppose.”

Given the strained smile on his face, it seemed Reggie had picked up on that himself. As soon as we made it up to the third floor, he pulled me by the hand and dragged me into the first room he could find.

Perhaps because it was the servants’ quarters, it was a simple room with nothing but a bed. There was no desk to be found, and it was even smaller than my chambers in Évrard.

Reggie sat down on the bed beside me. Upon setting down the notebook I’d been carrying under my arm, I realized I’d left Master Horace behind on the desk. That went to show just how disoriented I’d been by everything.

“I take it you figured it out, Kiara.”

“Yeah. That was your mother, wasn’t it?”

Linessé was the name of Reggie’s mother, whom he had told me about so many times.

“I’d always thought it strange that she was supposedly kidnapped by bandits, yet we never received any ransom demands. If she simply turned into ash and disappeared... Well, that explains that. No wonder we never managed to find the body.”

Reggie gave my hand a light squeeze.



"I bet my grandfather was the one who handed her over to Lord Credias. Twelve years ago, he went to war with Salekhard; he must have sacrificed my mother to the House of Credias to enlist the help of a spellcaster. Then he covered it up with the story of a bandit kidnapping."

I couldn't refute the possibility. I knew full well that there *were* people out there who would do that sort of thing to their own family.

"Did he hate your mother that much?"

"This was right after my father had passed away, so he'd found her more of an affront to him than ever, no doubt. The only issue was that my mother wasn't of royal blood. Thus, in place of a direct descendant of the royal family, he offered up the silver-haired daughter of Lord Patriciél as well. Yes, now I see... That certainly explains why Lord Patriciél was suddenly afforded such trust."

After voicing his theory, Reggie hung his head with a groan. He covered his face with one hand, something I'd never seen him do before. "I've caused my knights quite a bit of concern, haven't I?"

"They all reacted that way because they knew that was your mother's name. I think Sir Cain figured it out the moment he saw the ring, too. The look on his face changed, and he insisted we go find you right away."

"Even Wentworth was fussing over me, hm? Still, I'm glad to finally know what happened to her," he said, his eyes still cast downward. "Before this... I'd always considered the possibility that my mother had used her connections to put on a charade, all so she could leave behind the bed of nails the royal palace had been to her."

"But it's not like the two of you were on bad terms, right?"

Despite how little affection Reggie held for his own flesh and blood, I'd never once heard him speak ill of his parents. I could hardly believe he'd suspected his own mother of abandoning him the whole time.

"As far back as I can remember, I'd been separated from my mother and raised under my grandfather's supervision. That was back when my father was still alive, even. I have to assume it was to keep my mother from being needlessly attacked by my grandfather, and to keep me from earning his ire and suffering for it."

He clammed up there. I had a feeling I knew what he was struggling to say.

Whether it had been for his sake or not, Reggie hadn't been happy with that decision. He'd wanted to spend more time with his mom and dad. Still, he had known that was the best choice in light of his own safety, so he couldn't argue against it.

After a long stretch of his silence, he heaved a sigh, dropped his

hand, and lifted his head. “And that’s all there is to it; nothing for you to worry about, Kiara. You should go get some rest yourself. We ought to be focusing our thoughts on the Thorn Princess, at any rate.”

He told me not to worry, but he didn’t tell me he was alright.

“I’m going to stay here a little while longer.”

“Kiara...”

“I won’t leave you here all by yourself. Being alone when you’re feeling down just makes everything worse.”

If I left now, no doubt he would spiral into more and more depressing thoughts. He was probably disgusted with himself for assuming his mother had abandoned him all this time, when she’d really been murdered. The fact that it was his own relative who had done the deed had to make it hurt all the more.

And yet, no matter how horrible a crime his grandfather had committed, he was still the same man who had protected Reggie from his uncle—the king—until the day he died. Reggie’s feelings toward him must have been mixed, to say the least.

Crouching in a corner of the room and bearing those burdens all by his lonesome would only bring him more suffering.

“It’s okay to rely on me in times like this, Reggie. We’re practically family, aren’t we?”

Reggie seemed taken aback by that remark. After a few moments of thought, however, he smiled and opened his arms. “Can I ask for a hug, then?”

“Uh... wha?”

He wants me to initiate it?!

I was thrown completely off guard. Whenever I’d hugged him before, it had always been in the heat of the moment, or because he was facing imminent danger. Attempting it when we were all alone and sitting face-to-face was almost too embarrassing to consider.

Reggie looked saddened by my reaction. “You don’t want to?”

“I-It’s not... Okay, okay, fine!”

All he wanted was some comfort, and I *was* the one who had insisted on staying by his side. I threw my arms around Reggie’s neck with all my might. He proceeded to lift me up and sit me atop his lap.

“Huh?!”

He wrapped his arms around me, cutting off my escape route. The pose we were in made me think back to the time he’d rescued me in Liadna.

More precisely, the time he’d confessed his love for me and kissed me.

Reggie stroked my hair with a fond expression, letting his hand slide down my neck. It was so discomfiting that I squirmed a little in his hold, but I didn’t raise any objections. With the both of us so close,

staring right into each other's eyes, I couldn't bring myself to tear my gaze away.

He cupped my cheek, and after a brief moment, drew me close to press his lips to mine. This was the second time now he'd given me a peck of a kiss. I hadn't had nearly enough time to get used to this sort of thing, yet something about it still managed to put me at ease.

The way I couldn't bring myself to rebuff him felt like I might as well be admitting my feelings for him. How embarrassing.

We indulged in that moment of happiness for a bit, but Reggie didn't seem interested in pulling away any time soon. I tried to move my head, but he just slid the hand at my cheek behind my ear and kissed me even harder.

He bit down gently on my lip, sending a shiver down my spine. I was starting to get scared now, but when I cracked open the eyes I'd squeezed shut at some point or another, I saw that Reggie was staring at me with an oddly watchful gaze.

Is he waiting for me to panic and run?

The thought made me defiant enough to dig my heels in and refuse to go anywhere. Reggie chuckled, his eyes half-lidded, and deepened the kiss.

It was getting so hard to breathe that my mind was in a haze. The chills running straight up my spine and into my head were making me dizzy. When I jerked my head back all of a sudden, Reggie finally backed off.

Reggie brushed his lips over my cheek as I caught my breath. "Was that too much? Forgive me, Kiara."

The kiss must have built up my tolerance, seeing as the peck on the cheek hardly fazed me; in fact, it just left me wanting for *more*. My own desires were leaving me so perplexed that I was seconds away from tearing up.

"You're so sweet I want to eat you right up. Believe it or not, I'm actually reining myself in quite a bit. If I ever end up leaving you all alone... I wouldn't want you to cry, you see."

"All alone? Are you planning to leave me behind?"

My mind was in too much of a fog for me to think straight, but I could tell that Reggie was feeling lonely again.

As soon as I'd asked my question, he looked back at me with a bewitching smile the likes of which I'd never seen. "Never. I just don't want to fall out of your favor."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to worry about that?"

Back in Liadna, I couldn't bring myself to tell Reggie I loved him. Not only had I promised Cain that I wouldn't choose one person above anyone else, but all the memories jumbled around in my head had given me cold feet. Still, since I'd already told him I wasn't

disinterested in him, I'd assumed he knew how I felt.

"If you want me to believe you, will you indulge me just a little bit more?" he asked, tightening his arms around me.

Would holding me help fill the void in his heart? I hugged him back, hoping to stave off some of his solitude.

"I'm not going anywhere," I asserted, but Reggie still had his doubts.

"Then prove to me that I've truly made you mine, Kiara."

His lips trailed from right below my ear all the way down to the nape of my neck, and the ticklish sensation made me jolt. He wasn't nibbling on me just yet, but I could tell he was hungering.

I was the one who had driven him to desperation by making him wait too long. I'd been too scared to give my loved one words of assurance, yet I never turned down the kindness he offered me.

Though he had done a good job of hiding it, he was probably overwhelmed with loneliness and despondency over his mother. I didn't want him to keep feeling that way. Convinced I *had* to tell him now, I finally put my own feelings into words.

"I love you, Reggie," I said, my voice small and cracking.

My words clearly reached his ears nonetheless. He lifted his face from my neck, exhaled a deep breath, and embraced me once more.

I could tell how relieved he was, and I likewise felt reassured in his arms.

"Kiara."

"What is it?"

"If that's really true," he whispered into my ear, "can I ask you to indulge me like this every now and then?"

It was embarrassing to be asked the same question even more directly. But I nodded.

"Sure."

"It's a promise, then."



When I woke up the next morning, I immediately flashed back to the happenings of the previous night, covered my face with my hands, and started whimpering. Now I was really in it. I'd gotten swept up in the mood and admitted my feelings for him.

I rolled around atop the bed I was sleeping in. It wouldn't do anything to take back what I'd said, of course, but flailing around until I wore myself out took some of the edge off the embarrassment.

Once I'd gotten that out of my system, I let out a sigh and sprawled out over the bed, only for Master Horace to laugh at me. "Careful, these walls are pretty thin. Make *too* much noise and that prince might hear it! Mmheehee!"

“Ugh...”

I’d already told Master Horace about my little love confession. Or to be more precise, he’d sensed something was up the minute he saw me. When I finally left Reggie to go pick my mentor up, he’d made a note of how red I was.

“Given the blush on your face, I’m guessing you ran away from that prince of yours in a hurry,” he’d said.

“No way! Is my face really that red?! Oh, this is all Reggie’s fault!”

I’d smooshed my cheeks together in shame, and Master Horace had another good laugh. “Let me guess: the prince tried something funny, and you ended up telling him your feelings? Ohohoho! What, did he beg you to say you loved him?”

“He didn’t *beg*. Just...”

Considering he’d been feeling vulnerable enough to ask me to indulge him, I’d wanted to do *something* for him.

“You felt bad for him because he’d just learned how his mother died?”

“Uh. Yeah.”

Apparently, after Reggie and I had left the banquet hall, the rest of the knights there had traded notes on how the prince’s mother had been turned into a defective spellcaster and killed. Master Horace had been there, too, so he had heard the whole story.

“You were trying to comfort him and got swept up in the mood?”

“Uh...”

“Looks like I was right on the money.”

Before I knew it, Master Horace had worked out the entire story.

“How did you know?”

“There’s only one thing a lady-killer would do in a situation like that,” he’d answered, his tone almost soft despite the scoff that accompanied it. “But if you ask me, this is better than the ambiguous relationship status you had before. Put it off too long and you’d just be leaving him in limbo. I’m surprised he waited as long as he did.”

“It wasn’t a good idea to make him wait, huh? I had the feeling I might be asking too much of him, but I just took his word for it when he said he didn’t mind.”

I’d deflated a bit, and Master Horace had chuckled. “Eh, he could stand to learn a lesson in restraint. Otherwise, he might run a little *too* wild. Heeheeheel!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I had thought back to what he’d just done. Yeah, that probably counted as “running wild.”

One too many trips down memory lane sent me rolling all over the bed again.

Some time later, Cain came to call me to breakfast. I was flustered

when I heard his voice, and coming face-to-face with Reggie at the table not long after sent me over the edge into full panic mode. Master Horace had a good laugh at my expense. I eventually managed to get a grip on myself, but I still couldn't bring myself to look Reggie in the eye. Reggie seemed amused by my behavior, so I was hopeful that he hadn't misinterpreted my reaction.

We set out the same day, ready to meet up with Alan's troops now that we had finished our search. I spent the journey with Cain, so there weren't too many more heart-pounding surprises.

That said, now that Reggie wasn't paying much attention to me, I was starting to wonder if the events of the previous night had been some dream or hallucination of mine. I couldn't help staring over at Reggie during one of our breaks.

Our eyes met.

Reggie smiled, his gaze softening, then came to join me where I was sitting in the shade of a tree.

"Have you been lonely? I apologize, Kiara," he said, kneeling down in front of me and looking me straight in the eyes.

"Um, I wouldn't say that. It just doesn't feel real yet, maybe."

I did confess my love to him, right? So, like... does that make us a real couple now?

Of course, we were in the middle of a war here—about as far as you could get from the sort of romantic scenarios I'd associate with that. Besides, most of the stuff that popped to mind were things you'd do with a classmate at school, or manga about falling in love with an older guy in your club. Thus, I wasn't really sure what to consider us now.

Reggie seemed to guess what I was thinking. With a chuckle, he whispered, "You reciprocated my feelings, you know. That means you're mine now."

He'd said it quietly enough that no one else could hear, but I certainly did, loud and clear. My face began to heat up.

"As much as I'd love to spread the word, this is your first relationship, isn't it? I was informed that you didn't court anyone while you were living in Évrard."

"Uh... yeah."

As embarrassing as it was to admit, he was right. When I nodded in response, Reggie looked pleased, the corners of his mouth quirked up.

For a fleeting second, I was entranced by that smile. *But hold on just a second here! Didn't he say something weird just now? What does he mean, "informed"?*

I had a few questions about *that* remark, but Reggie just kept on talking like it was nothing. "You aren't used to public displays of

affection yet, are you? I don't want to scare you off, so I'd like to get you accustomed to it little by little. For now, let's keep it to this."

"For now?"

"Eventually, I'll be keeping you so busy you won't have a spare moment to feel nervous."

Reggie patted me on the head, and with that, he walked back to his own horse. I watched him go in a daze. It was only after a long delay that I finally remembered what I'd been wondering about.

"Why was he informed?"

Master Horace heaved a sigh. "He must have ordered someone to keep an eye on you while he was away. If you started crushing on someone else, he just might have stepped in to interfere. He's a possessive one, that prince."

"Possessive, huh?"

Master Horace sounded unimpressed, and I realized that what he was suggesting was actually a little terrifying, but somehow I was a little pleased to hear it.

When I said as much to Master Horace, he muttered, "You two deserve each other."



The return trip took us a little longer than the journey there. Two days later, we finally caught up to Alan's troops, which were traveling south of the royal domain.

Not long after, Lady Évrard and her men passed through Kilrea. We were soon informed that Lord Patriciél's troops had moved into Sestina.

Interlude: What Can I Do for You?

At that moment, Cain knew they were going to need Kiara's help.

What Kiara had found by relying on her past-life memories were two small trinkets. Seeing as they belonged to that witch in a child's form, it hadn't struck him as particularly odd that the mystery items had turned out to be accessories; however, the ring in particular presented a few complications.

When Kiara handed it over to him, his eyes had gone wide. It was the crest engraved on the back of the ring that set off alarms in his head. The moment he saw that, he thought back to his first meeting with Reginald.

Even as a child, Reginald had never been one to show his emotions on his face. Slowly but surely, he had learned how to horse around with Alan and Cain, and ever since Lady Évrard had begun to look after him, he had loosened up little by little. Something had felt off about it—almost like the prince was just *pretending* to enjoy himself. Still, Cain had written it off as his first impression coloring his perspective.

One day, however, Lady Évrard had said to him, “He's gotten awfully good at pushing down his emotions and putting on a brave face. I'm sure that will make his life as a prince easier, but still...”

The moment he heard that, Cain realized what had felt wrong to him about Reginald. The boy wasn't truly happy. He was just faking it—for Alan, who naively considered him a friend, and for Lord and Lady Évrard, who had gone to great lengths to help the orphaned prince.

The next time Cain had accompanied Alan to the royal palace confirmed it for him. There, Reginald would always weigh his options with a smile that wasn't the least bit childlike. He opened up around his attendant, Mabel, but he otherwise spent his days hiding his true feelings, giving those he wanted to keep away from him the cold shoulder.

Whenever he was around his grandfather—who always pushed his own ideals onto the child—or his uncle—who hated him—he would play the part of an obedient child, all while regarding them with ice in his eyes.

When Cain had seen that, he'd just known: Prince Reginald had given up on ever finding someone he could truly rely on.

The fact that he had given up meant he must have *had* something like that once upon a time. Most likely, that would have been his father, or perhaps his mother—whom he had never seen much of, but had always put him first in her life. She was Linesse, the former queen who had been left no choice but to leave her son in his grandfather's hands.

Cain had heard Reginald talk about her before. He'd mentioned that she was kind. That she worried about him a great deal. And that she bore the crest of the queen, too.

The knight also knew about the mysterious circumstances surrounding the queen's disappearance. Lord and Lady Évrard had wanted to go looking for her, but circumstances hadn't permitted it, and days upon days had gone by without anyone taking action. By the time they had actually begun the search, there were no leads to be found.

But *of course* there wouldn't have been any clues. Now that he knew royalty had long been offered as sacrifices to spellcasters in exchange for their services, he could assume that it was the former king himself who had swept Queen Linesse's disappearance under the rug. If someone had attempted to turn her into a mage, she must have turned to sand and left no corpse behind.

Cain had rushed to inform Reginald, dragging along Kiara, who was still oblivious to the truth. He had to tell him that the queen had never abandoned him.

There was a good chance *that* was why Reginald had shuttered himself so; even his most tender memories couldn't be trusted. Thus, someone had to go tell him he'd had it all wrong. As someone who had gone astray for so long in search of a replacement for the family he lost, only to finally wake up to what he still had in his hands, Cain knew how important this was.

When Reginald saw the ring, he looked even more shocked than Cain had anticipated. If nothing else, he wanted to give the prince, who hardly had so much as a fond memory to his name, somewhere he could cry. He knew neither he nor Alan would be able to do that.

Hence, when Groul had urged Reginald to get some rest and Felix had encouraged Kiara to tag along, he hadn't raised any objections. After all, Kiara was the one and only person Reginald could truly be vulnerable around.

Of course, he'd had his misgivings about letting the two of them be alone together, too. Given how upset Reginald was, he'd known there was a chance the prince might abandon all restraint. Still, Kiara wasn't just any ordinary girl. She may not have known how to hold a sword, but she had power. Besides, if Kiara made a genuine attempt to rebuff his advances, he'd be too afraid of earning her ire to step over

the line.

Cain was right on those points, and Kiara managed to calm Reginald down without any issue. She soon came back to pick up Horace.

After that, Kiara and Reginald both conducted themselves as normal... for the most part.



“Kiara seems different.”

It was not long after they’d caught up to the town where the army was staying and reunited with Alan’s Farzian troops. Now that they’d made it to safety, Cain had left Kiara’s side for a time. It was Girsch who had made the passing comment.

“She seems calmer somehow,” the mercenary maintained, gazing over where Kiara was talking to Gina.

In some ways, she seemed the same as ever, and in others, she seemed different. Girsch was right; she *did* seem a touch more composed.

“She seems a little more grown-up, yes,” Cain agreed.

The look on her face was somehow alluring... and so, the first thought Cain had was that something had happened with Reginald. It was enough to make him regret that he’d let her go the other night.

He’d known how she felt. From the very beginning, the two of them had always been looking each other’s way. The reason Kiara had been so unstable for so long was because of her and Reginald’s inability to communicate their feelings.

Most likely, they’d both been afraid. Neither wanted to fall out of the other’s favor, but they still insisted on protecting each other whether the recipient liked it or not. Then, whenever they acted on that desire, they assumed they’d upset the other and beat themselves up over it.

What had finally stopped the cycle was Kiara waking up to her own feelings, as well as Reginald gaining a power that he could only wield by her side.

As Cain was reflecting on all that, Girsch gave a small giggle.

“Is something funny?”

“No, not at all. I just didn’t expect you to hit the nail on the head like that. But you know, when a girl knows someone loves her, she truly starts to glow, whether she’s happy or sad. Gina was like that, too,” Girsch reflected, then looked over at Cain. “I must say, I’m surprised you let her go.”

The remark was blunt enough to draw a wry smile from the knight. “Even if we can’t have *that* sort of relationship, she won’t run from me. I realize that now.”

This second war may have dredged up his regrets and grudges over his late family, but Kiara was the one who had managed to wipe that all away. He knew that she would come running whenever he wished for it—even in a life-threatening situation.

Rather, if he *hadn't* been in such a life-threatening situation, he never would have been able to believe Kiara's promises. He knew full well how fickle the human heart could be.

"Thank goodness you fell for a teenage girl who doesn't know how to lie; I bet that's why you're so calm right now. Hehehe."

Girsch was probably right. If she had been his own age, it was likely Cain still wouldn't have trusted her. Telling white lies could be considered another form of kindness, sure, but obscuring her true feelings would only have fed into his paranoia.

"So are you going to keep up the 'big brother' act for now?" Girsch asked.

Cain blinked in response. "What are you talking about? I'll always be her older brother."

That was the one thing he refused to give up. If he ever saw reason to, he would speak out against Reginald. Should the prince ever abandon Kiara, he would just bring her back to his side. If that many cracks ever formed in their relationship, there was little doubt that she would drift Cain's way.

He just had to wait until then.

"Until that day comes, I plan to remain her nosy older brother."

At that, Girsch cracked up laughing.

Interlude: And Thus Did They Meet

Ada didn't want to go back to the royal capital. There was nothing left for her there.

Now that Lord Credias was dead, no one could force her to use her magic anymore. But what was the point of going home? She had no idea what had become of her parents after Llewynne's descent upon the royal capital.

Her family had been deep in debt, anyway. She'd heard that her parents had requested financial support from Lord Credias multiple times. Relying on them wouldn't be an option.

Having said that, she couldn't defect back to the prince's side. Setting everything else she had done aside, she had slain a member of the nobility. She had killed her fair share of Farzian soldiers, too. Felix, the prince's knight, had nearly died by her hand as well, though it appeared he'd made it out of their encounter alive.

If she turned herself in, no doubt she would be tossed into a dungeon for her troubles. Worse still, she might be killed for fear of her magic.

She didn't want to be imprisoned. The thought terrified her. And that fear was what carried her all the way to Sestina.

When she arrived at the castle town, it was in shambles. There were at least 10,000 soldiers quartered there, and the majority of them were foreigners. The men swaggered around the city, looking down their noses at the actual residents. Though the citizens surely wished to speak up about their plight, Lord Sestina had already been assassinated, leaving Llewynne-aligned nobles to rule the land; there was no way they would be granted an audience. The ones who had nowhere to run had no choice but to suffer in silence, their expressions grim.

Strengthening the town's gloomy impression even further was the single-file line of people, their wrists and waists bound together with rope, being herded along by Llewynian soldiers. The citizens of the town averted their eyes from the spectacle—likely out of fear that the same fate might one day befall them.

The prisoners had been allowed shoes, at the very least, but only ones of the old and worn-out variety. Their bodies were wrapped up in tattered blankets, perhaps a consideration their captors had made in light of the chillier weather. Their hair was so dirty that it was hard to

guess when it had last been washed. The majority of the procession were either unshaven men or boys too young to grow a beard.

They were probably slaves dragged in from who knows where. Llewynne still practiced that custom, it seemed.

Considering they were all men, Ada assumed that the plan was to make them into indentured soldiers. That meant Llewynne's numbers would exceed the last count she'd heard.

Will Kiara be able to win? was the first thought to pass through her mind.

The obstacle the viscount presented had been eliminated. More defective spellcasters still remained, however, and those would need to be dealt with. If Kiara and the prince focused their efforts there, the rest of the battle would come down to your typical contest of numbers.

In most cases, war was a fight of attrition. If the battle devolved into a free-for-all, there was no telling if Felix or the prince would get out unscathed.

"This way, Lady Spellcaster! Hurry!" a knight urged her, and she followed him into Sestina Castle.

The castle was an exercise in elegance. The interior had been devastated and set aflame at some point during the war, but it had more or less been tidied up since.

In a room overlooking the landscape beyond the town limits was Lord Patriciél. Given that he was wearing the same long-sleeved jacket, vest, and Oxford shoes she'd seen him wearing at the royal palace, she assumed he wasn't going to be heading out to the front anytime soon.

The knight who had escorted Ada there explained what had happened during the Battle of Eirlain. After the count had heard the full report, he gave a soft sigh.

"So that's the end of Credias? I see," he muttered. "He always was an unruly one."

That was all he had to say on the matter.

Ada was puzzled by the lack of reaction. Here she'd expected him to lament the loss of such a valuable asset. Not to mention that he and the viscount had known each other for years now; surely he should have felt *something* over the man's passing.

She pondered what he could be thinking, only to snap to attention the moment she heard her own name. "What will you do now, Ada? Wasn't the reason you let yourself get caught up in this war that you couldn't come up with a means of escape?"

The question took Ada by surprise. It was almost as if he was telling her she *should* run away.

"Are you saying I don't have to fight?" she couldn't help but ask.

Lord Patriciél snorted. “A spellcaster can’t be *forced* to wield her magic. Now that we’ve lost our means of keeping you under control, the matter is out of our hands. We couldn’t even hope to use your parents to blackmail you; they’re already dead.”

“They’re... what?”

“I’m sure you suspected as much. They insisted on broadcasting their daughter’s magical talents throughout the Llewynian army in hopes of scraping together some money. It was bound to throw a wrench in our plans at some point, so we disposed of them accordingly.”

And so, it was through a passing remark that Ada finally learned the fate of her parents.

From the sound of it, the count had considered using them as blackmail material. Uninterested in letting them fatten their pockets, however, he had instead ordered them removed for the nuisances they were.

The revelation stirred up little more than dull surprise within Ada. It wasn’t as though she’d never experienced their kindness; she could still recall the days when they’d run themselves ragged to give her a happy life. Those memories, however, had long since become a thing of the past. They had been overwritten by the times her parents had scorned her and said she had no value to them, even as a political tool; the times they had berated her for letting herself be defiled by the viscount; and of course, the time they had informed her that she had been effectively disowned.

After all that, they had tried to get ahead by name-dropping the daughter they had supposedly washed their hands of, it was hard to feel too mournful about their passing. Anyone could see that they had cared more for themselves and their fortune than they ever had about love.

“Nobody is going to come looking for you anymore. If you hide yourself out in the countryside, assuming the prince doesn’t get desperate enough to send a search party after you, you’ll be able to live your life without fear of imprisonment.” Lord Patriciél gave a wave of his hand as if to say, *Get going!*

Ada was stunned. She had been sure he’d brought her here to tell her the strategy and persuade her to go into battle. She began agonizing over whether or not to fight... and in doing so, realized that she’d *wanted* to be saved from making her own decision on that for a little while longer.

Still, under normal circumstances, he would have forced her into battle no matter how she begged and pleaded. Llewyn had to contend with Kiara’s power as a spellcaster, as well as those mercenary-tamed monsters. Farzia and Salekhard had joined forces now, too. To make

matters even worse, Prince Reginald himself had learned how to wield some form of magic.

No ordinary army could hope to stand against them. Did he have some sort of plan to deal them a hefty blow here, then turn the tables in the next battle?

Regardless, if they lost the Battle of Sestina, their commander-in-chief, Lord Patriciél, was likely to go down with the ship. So why wasn't he backing down from the fight?

"Do you have some sort of ace up your sleeve?" she blurted out.

"Of a sort. Ah... I see you're convinced we're going to lose. I suppose anyone would think that, given the circumstances," he said with a chuckle. "I don't need you to understand my reasons. Her Majesty made my dream come true; in exchange, I plan to stay by her side until the bitter end. Surely you, of all people, can appreciate that."

When she heard that, Ada finally understood: this man didn't desire anything more than Queen Marianne herself.



Following that conversation, Ada lingered in Sestina Castle. She borrowed a room there and had the jittery servants tend to her needs.

No matter how hard she thought about the future, she couldn't come to a decision. After all, she didn't have the skills to fend for herself.

Daughters of nobility never had the chance to buy things for themselves, so she didn't know how to handle money. She hadn't the faintest idea where to begin with renting a house. While Lord Credias had treated her as a servant, she had never run an errand outside the manor, so she had little knowledge of anything but housework.

If she tried turning to the nobility for help, she would be making her whereabouts known. Whenever the prince decided he wanted to try her for her crimes, it would be easy to find her.

Perhaps she *was* better off waiting around until the battle was over. But if they lost, would she have to go back to the queen? She didn't want to do that, either.

While she was still debating her course of action, she was offered the opportunity to dine with the count. She took him up on his invitation—though she wasn't clear exactly why he had offered it.

He asked her, "If you aren't planning to flee, will you go to the front?"

"Well..."

Ada was almost relieved that he had finally come out and asked her. That said, she had no desire to fight. Just as she was about to request some time to think it over, she suddenly changed her mind

and asked a different question entirely. “You plan to fight for Her Majesty, yes?”

Lord Patriciél responded without batting an eyelash. “We first met when she was only thirteen. I was sent to Llewynne as part of a delegation in charge of postwar negotiations. I had to sacrifice my own daughter for the opportunity, but at least I succeeded in gaining the king’s trust.”

“Did you just say ‘your own daughter’?”

“She was made into a spellcaster, just like you. Though based on what I heard, the experiment failed, and she died as a result.”

Ada’s hand slipped in shock, her knife nearly clattering to the table. He’d tried to turn his own daughter into a spellcaster? No matter how cold-hearted she’d thought her own parents, at least *they* had only tried to use her, rather than sending her to her death.

All of a sudden, she was starting to see the count as a beast in human clothing.

“What, you didn’t know? Here I’d assumed Credias must have told you,” he replied, nonchalantly munching away at his meal. He shoved a forkful of meat into the very mouth that had just confessed to sacrificing his own child.

“A mere generation ago, the royal family despised the House of Patriciél; they confiscated half of our territory and raised our taxes higher than any of the other provinces. Marrying an illegitimate daughter of the royal family was my one and only option to rectify the situation.”

From the sound of it, he’d married for political gain, taking a royal woman who couldn’t come forth about her lineage as his wife.

“We had a daughter together. When I heard that the royal family needed her, given our tenuous standing, I had no choice but to hand her over. As I said earlier, she failed the trial to become a spellcaster, and the royal family covered up their hand in her death. My wife had already passed away by this point, so it was easy enough to keep hidden.”

Considering Ada had been turned into a spellcaster herself, she didn’t find this a particularly pleasant topic.

Lord Patriciél continued his story. “Oh, right, I was supposed to be telling you about Her Majesty. At the time, I hoped to restore my house to its former glory by leveraging my ties to the Llewynian nobility. I went to Llewynne, and that was where I met Queen Marianne.”

Queen Marianne, only thirteen years old at the time, had been doing everything in her power to curry favor with the king. There had been several instances of Llewynian princesses being married off multiple times over to set the stage for an invasion, and many of those

unfortunate women ended up murdered in a fit of rage by their husband or his family. As a matter of fact, one of Marianne's own aunts had died that way.

"I suppose it's because Llewyrne couldn't survive as a nation without expanding its territory. Climate change is slowly but surely eroding the whole country into desert. The citizens must be rather anxious about the situation themselves; I believe they've never lost a war apart from the one with Évrard."

Marianne had been convinced that *she* would be the one offered up during these ceasefire negotiations. Her older sister had already been married off to another country, after all.

That had led her to interrogate Lord Patriciél about Évrard's current state of affairs. "She wanted all the information on her soon-to-be home that she could get. At first, I found it to be quite an inconvenience. Her Majesty must have noticed how reluctant I was to give her the time of day; she offered to trade Llewyrnian intel for answers to her questions."

Lord Patriciél accepted her offer, figuring he could use that information to elevate the status of his house even further. After several conversations with her, he began to empathize with this girl who was clearly struggling just as much as he was. Long after the decision was made that she would *not* be presented as a bride, the two still kept in contact with one another.

When she was finally married off to Farzia after the second war, he won several Farzian lords over to her side. The fruits of his efforts could be seen in the number of nobles who had defected in the ongoing conflict.

Of course, Lord Patriciél did not throw his lot in with Queen Marianne out of pity for a girl so close to his daughter in age. If he had anything resembling a conscience, he would have done whatever it took to protect his own little girl. Moreover, if he was truly that tormented over his daughter's sacrifice, he never would have considered handing his adoptive child, Kiara, over to the viscount.

The most likely explanation was that he had simply fallen in love with Queen Marianne, little girl that she was. However, the age gap between them had been large enough that he hadn't wanted to admit it until their reunion sometime after she'd come of age.

He cared enough about the princess of another country to devote his whole life to her, yet—whether she was a product of an undesirable marriage or not—had sacrificed his own daughter, and even now was using countless slaves as his pawns on the battlefield. Though Ada found that dual nature of his somewhat alarming, she couldn't bring herself to condemn it.

She had acted the same way, after all. To her, Lord Azure had

been nothing but a pawn to help her achieve her own desires. No matter how kind he'd been to her, she had always looked down upon the good-hearted and naive marquis, until eventually she'd disposed of him like a piece of trash lying in her path. She had convinced herself that was the only way she could be with the prince... without even realizing how thoroughly those ambitions had twisted her.

What had clued her in to her own shortsightedness were the actions of Felix and Kiara. Unlike Prince Reginald, who never so much as looked her way, Felix had indulged her many whims—even if it was just part of his job—and shared some frank advice with her. When she had nearly killed him, the moment she knew she might never hear his words of guidance again, it had dawned on her that she treasured *his* approval more than the prince's.

And then there was Kiara, the girl whom she had tried to blame for everything that went wrong in her life—with the reason being that she'd always looked down upon her. But of course, Ada had likely viewed Kiara as beneath her because she'd seen *herself* as pathetic from the start.

Ada's parents had never paid her much mind, and her betrothed wasn't anyone to write home about. Hearing the rumors of the tormented Kiara and thinking, *I'm better off than her* was what had kept her going.

After she had been forced into marriage with Lord Credias, she'd found some comfort in telling herself it was all Kiara's fault for running away; however, when she'd witnessed Kiara's captivity in Trisphede, she'd realized how naive it was to think that.

If Kiara had been the one to marry Lord Credias, she would have suffered an even worse fate than Ada. No doubt she wouldn't have been afforded the same "grace period" Ada had. When she saw how hellbent the viscount was on assaulting the apprehended girl, it had dawned on her just how easy she'd had it.

Had talking about Queen Marianne loosened his lips? Whatever the reason, Lord Patriciél took the opportunity to come clean about everything. "If you're going to run, now is the time. The only reason you caught our attention in the first place was because of your father."

"What?"

"We needed him to forge some documents for us so that we could get our hands on a contract stone mine."

Lord Credias *had* possessed a wealth of contract stones, and considering he held no territory of his own, there was no way he owned any mines. Ada had always assumed Lord Patriciél must have had one to his name, but it seemed she'd guessed wrong.

"The one we found was in the royal domain—in other words, on land that used to belong to the House of Patriciél. If we wanted to

secure a mass of contract stones without the royal family's knowledge, we needed to pull in your father, who managed the province's official papers. Hence we arranged for you to marry Credias."

"Wha..."

What a revelation. Ada was struck speechless.

"Your fiancé stood in the way of that goal. It was easy enough to get another woman to seduce him away from you and then offer him the funds to elope. We hadn't dreamed that you would storm out of the wedding venue, however. Not only did it take a good bit of time to track you down, but Credias gave me quite the fright when he nearly killed you in that little experiment of his."

The reason Ada's wedding had gone the way it did—the reason she'd been forced to marry Lord Credias—had all come down to a secret plot to harvest contract stones.

Still dazed, Ada left the banquet hall and headed back to her quarters. She hit the sofa with a thud.

Lord Patriciél had told her she didn't have to stick around. Her mother and father were both gone now. Furthermore, her entanglement with the viscount had never been Kiara's fault.

She had even less of an idea of what to do than she had before dinner.

"I don't want to fight, but..."

Ada chewed on her lip. Wasn't there anyone who could drag her away from here... who could tell her what to do?

At that moment, something Kiara had once said rose to mind.

My original plan was to live a commoner's life off in a corner of the town.

If Kiara could pull it off, there was no reason Ada couldn't. If nothing else, that life would treat her better than a grisly end on the battlefield.

And yet, she couldn't will herself to get to her feet. The idea of venturing out into the unknown was too terrifying.

It was right then that she heard a knock on the sliding door of the veranda. When she turned to look, her eyes flew open in surprise. On the other side stood a silver-haired girl.

Chapter 2: The Assault on Fort Nazant

We met up with Alan's troops at a certain town within the royal domain. It wasn't surrounded by any sort of rampart, so our throng of over 10,000 soldiers was camping out just outside the city limits.

Upon arriving at the entrance to the town, we found Alan and Isaac there waiting for us.

"Any luck?" Alan asked.

Reggie nodded. "You could say that. But first, I'd like to hear how things have gone on your end."

"Very well. I saved us a spot in the mayor's manor, so let's take this conversation there. I've secured enough empty rooms for the rest of you lot to stay in, too."

Amid their conversation, I had Cain help me down from our horse onto the ground.

Curiosity in his voice, Isaac asked, "I always see you sharing a horse with that knight of yours. What, don't know how to ride one?"

"I do! Just... if something happened, it wouldn't be safe for—"

"Riding a horse makes it harder for her to concentrate on her spells, so I'm here to assist her," Cain said, taking over the explanation.

Given that he *was* technically speaking to a king, Cain kept his tone respectful, but he was definitely giving off vibes of *If you've got something to say, say it to me*. Considering the man had nearly killed him once, Cain was understandably wary of Isaac.

Isaac, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed. "Then I assume there's no issue if *I* give her a lift whenever we're traveling together. Hey, Kiara! Ride with me next time."

"Thanks, but no thanks," I replied bluntly. "Aren't you a king? You can't just go wherever I direct you."

"Sure I can," he replied.

Uh, you are a king, aren't you? I'm pretty sure he's just joking, but still... What do I need to say to make him back off?

Mikhail was the one to help me out of my dilemma. "That's quite enough, Your Majesty. That sort of thing calls for a relationship built on trust. Besides, I'm sure that knight has acquired a decent enough understanding of magic to know exactly what's needed of him."

"Hmm. Do you truly have that much faith in him?" Isaac asked

me point-blank.

I nodded. "He's like an older brother to me."

"You're his little sister, you say? Hmm... Very well. Henceforth, I shall be a brother to you, too. That means you can ride with me now, right? While we're at it, why don't you come live with your big bro in Salekhard somewhere down the line? We get plenty of snow, and it's always a delight to play in," he proposed with a smile.

Mikhail, who was standing a step behind him, looked exasperated. Alan looked weary, and Reggie and Cain were giving off icy vibes.

This is bad, I thought to myself.

I was pretty sure he was joking around. He knew that even if I *hadn't* already picked Reggie, I'd never take him up on his invitation. At the rate this conversation was going, however, I knew Reggie was going to end up mighty pissed.

That was when Master Horace suddenly burst out cackling. "Listen here, Salekhardian youngster! If you want to be Kiara's brother, that means you'd better start calling me 'Father' from now on. Eeeheehee!"

"Excuse me?!" The look on Isaac's face screamed, *What the hell are you talking about?*

Having realized that my mentor was throwing me a lifeline here, I chimed in with, "You've got a point there!"

Master Horace began spinning a web of lies with great gusto. "That's what Kiara's self-professed brother over there usually calls me. The prince always asks my permission before doing anything with her, too. Y'know, like... 'Father dearest, may I kindly request your daughter's company?'"

Isaac looked more than a little dubious, but Reggie let himself in on the joke. "Father dearest, I'd like to invite your daughter to eat with me in a bit. Do you mind?"

"Eeeheehee! You have my blessing."

Master Horace was delighted to see the prince sucking up to him, while I felt a tingle in my heart. I'd never expected there to be an opportunity for Reggie to ask my father for permission to take me to dinner. I was an orphan, after all.

Even Cain joined in. "Pardon me, Father. Speaking as her older brother, I'm not sure about letting her go out for dinner with another man."

"Heeheehee! Every daughter becomes a bride one day. Going out for a bite to eat is a good warm-up for the main event. And if they stay out past curfew, well, we'll just have to go drag her home."

"Are you lot serious?" Isaac was dumbfounded.

"What else would you expect?" came Cain's nonchalant reply.

"Miss Kiara has always loved Sir Horace like a father."

"Err, yes, that's true," I agreed.

Though he knew I cared deeply for Master Horace, Isaac probably hadn't realized I actually thought of him as a parent.

"Her father is a clay doll, hm?"

The look of pity he ultimately cast my way was a bitter pill to swallow. Eventually, Isaac just shrugged his shoulders and gave up on teasing me.

After that, we headed into the mayor's residence. It wasn't particularly big for a manor. It was three stories tall, and with about thirty or so rooms, it was essentially just a souped-up version of a wealthy merchant's home. There was only enough room to house the VIPs of the army. Half of the generals were staying in inns, with only Alan, Emmeline, former baron Henry Delphion, Isaac, and their respective knights spending the night here.

We used one of the parlors as our meeting room. What I heard there was that the Évrard troops led by Lady Évrard had successfully taken Kilrea. Based on the report, they had just entered the royal domain. We had also heard word from our spies in Lord Patriciél's territory that his troops had moved into Sestina.

"Does that mean the count abandoned his own territory?" Reggie pondered aloud.

Alan's lips pulled down into a frown. It seemed Lord Patriciél was so hellbent on defending the gates of the royal capital that he was willing to sacrifice his own land to do it. Even I had to wonder why he would go that far.

"Adding Patriciél's troops to the Llewynian forces in Sestina would bring them to about... twenty thousand men? Even assuming they pick up a few stragglers from the territories we seized, it couldn't be much more than that."

We had cut off Llewyn's soldier supply line when we captured Trisphede and forced Salekhard into surrender. Alan claimed that we wouldn't have to worry about them bolstering their forces any further.

"Is that why they plan to end this in Sestina? Since we're planning to join up with the troops that crossed through Kilrea, our numbers should easily exceed twenty thousand." Something about this didn't seem to add up for Reggie. "Come to think of it, were there any Llewynian soldiers to be found in the royal domain outside the one fort?"

"No. Excluding the lakeside fort and the border with Kilrea, there were no Llewynian soldiers stationed in this province. I'm sure the margravine will take care of the latter group," Alan surmised.

Reggie nodded. "We can leave the border for her to deal with."

"One more thing. I received a report from some spies I sent into Sestina," Isaac said. Said report involved the whereabouts of a person of interest. "Llewyn's female spellcaster was spotted near Fort

Nazant. I assume she headed to Sestina from there.”

“Miss Ada, you mean?”

Did she plan to keep on fighting? She never had made an appearance in Eirlain, though. If she had shown up to the battle, there was a good chance we might have lost, too.

If Ada was going to participate in the coming battle, that meant I would have to fight her. I didn’t want to do that. Though naturally, I wasn’t about to let our side lose either.

“Having a spellcaster join the fray will make things a lot more difficult,” said Reggie. “We’d best come up with a plan to deal with her.”

While I was still stuck on that, everyone else moved on to the next topic. If we kept heading west toward the royal capital, the province of Patriciél was going to present our next problem. We would have to remain on high alert, lest the Llewynian soldiers left behind in the forts attack us from the rear.

Reggie unceremoniously requested that the problem be dealt with. “We’ll leave that for you to handle, Lord Isaac.”

Isaac, who was sitting on the sofa opposite him, made a face. “Without any assistance?”

Reggie’s smile didn’t falter. “I don’t want to drag this out until winter and enter a stalemate as a result. I doubt *you* could afford to accompany us all the way through next spring, either. Besides, I could hardly imagine you’d disgrace yourself by losing to the dregs of Llewynne.”

To sum it up, he was saying, *What, are you too chicken to take on the tiny number of enemies that got left behind?* Isaac seemed to pick up on what Reggie was getting at, judging by the twitch in his face.

“No matter how serene you may look, I see you’re quick to pick a fight.”

“I don’t recall doing anything of the sort. You provoked me first, and I merely rose to the bait. I’ll capture Fort Sestina before you can catch up to us. After that, we’ll join up with you and Évrard’s troops to defeat the Llewynians in Sestina.”

“I suppose that’s the most reasonable plan there is, if you want to settle this quickly.”

“I *am* grateful for Salekhard’s efforts. You’re the reason we kept our losses in the royal domain to a minimum.”

Isaac snorted. “Well, I suppose one measly battle wouldn’t be enough to make up for our occupation of Trisphede. Fine, we’ll capture the fort north of Patriciél. Just keep in mind that we left some of our own men in Trisphede, and we can’t afford to call for them now. I’ll need you to lend me about two thousand more men.”

Reggie whispered something to Alan. With that, it was determined

that Alan's knight, Lyle, would join the Salekhardian troops alongside 2,000 other soldiers.

Isaac left the room to make preparations for his departure.

Now that all the urgent business was taken care of, we decided to break for food. Alan had already eaten, and unless we were camping, Cain never took meals with us.

"Why don't I make good on my invitation? I already got your father's permission, after all." Reggie grabbed me by the wrist, and together we went to go eat in the dining hall.

The mayor's wife and her servants set out a meal for us. Reggie dismissed the servants who had stayed behind to wait on us, insisting that it wouldn't be necessary.

Of course, that didn't mean we were alone together, exactly. Master Horace was still there. "I'm keeping an eye on you, mister. Eeeheehee!"

I placed my cackling doll atop the table, then started picking at my food.

"Considering how many unannounced visitors have descended upon their town, it's amazing how much effort they're putting into the food. I suppose we have Alan to thank for leaving them with a favorable impression of us," Reggie said, cutting his meatloaf with a knife.

I'd always thought as much, but Reggie really had a knack for handling utensils. Given that I'd been using forks and knives for years, I obviously knew the basics myself, but I never could manage to eat as elegantly as he did.

In other words, I was a slob.

I wanted to get better, though. Once we'd taken our country back, if Reggie still wanted to be... *with* me, there would be plenty of chances to put my table etiquette to the test. And on those occasions, I'd be compared to everyone else around me. I had a sinking feeling people were going to whisper things like *Goodness, doesn't that girl know the proper way to eat?* behind my back.

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that my meat slipped off my fork. I hastily scooped it back up, but I was starting to get nervous now. There was nothing more daunting than messing up in front of the epitome of perfection. I was starting to worry that I'd turn him off, at this rate.

Thinking about it, aside from our trip to Évrard Castle and the stops in between, I'd never been around Reggie over a stretch of several days before. We were still kids back then, so I hadn't given it too much thought, but now that I was grown-up, I was a lot more worried about how other people saw me.

My nerves had me eating pretty slowly, it seemed.

“What, too tired to eat?” Master Horace asked as he watched from beside me, which snapped me out of my reverie. When I saw that Reggie was almost done with *his* meal, I started shoveling food into my mouth as fast as I could.

Right as I finished up my meal out of a determination not to keep Reggie waiting, he asked, “Do you want any tea?”

I was about to decline the offer, but Reggie came by my side anyway, pouring tea into my cup.

“Come on, it’s wrong to have a prince wait on me like this!”

Seriously, shouldn’t I be the one doing that?! My lack of manners couldn’t be more obvious now, and it was enough to bum me out.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. If I asked someone else to wait on us, I wouldn’t get to sit next to you. Everyone would tell me it’s not proper for a prince,” he said, declaring that as his reason for sending the servants away. “So, are you full?”

“Uh, yeah.”

When I glanced down at the tea Reggie had poured for me, I couldn’t have felt more stuffed.

“Then how about you help quench *my* thirst, Kiara?” he said, twirling a lock of my hair around his finger. With every brush of hair against my skin, a shiver crawled up the back of my neck. After combing and toying with it for a bit, Reggie sunk his teeth into the tress.

“Whoa, Reggie?!”

I jolted, wondering what had possessed him to munch on my hair. Reggie pulled back, allowing the lock to slip from his fingers.

“You promised to indulge me, remember?”

“Yes, but I was just riding a horse! I’m all dirty!”

“I don’t mind.”

Reggie’s gaze softened, and he wrapped me up in his arms, nuzzling his face against my neck. With a giggle, he pressed his lips just beneath my ear for a fleeting moment.

“Eep!”

I let out a squeak as a ticklish sensation ran up my spine.

“Oh, come *on*,” Master Horace griped, exasperated.

Reggie firmly ignored him. “I want to get you used to touching me. Frankly speaking, I’d like to reach the point where you can ask me to hold you close, and I want *you* to want to kiss me,” he said, wrapping both of his hands around my neck and lifting my face to look up at him. “But for now, I’ll just make do with this.”

What does he mean, “for now”? Before I could ask, he sealed my lips with a kiss.

I could hear Master Horace sighing, but I wasn’t in the state of my mind to care about that when it was taking all I had just to breathe.

Reggie stopped his “indulging” there. “We shouldn’t monopolize this place for too long. I doubt either you or my brother would be too happy about that. Until next time, then.” With that, he finally let me leave.

“The future is starting to look grim,” Master Horace muttered, still flabbergasted. He kept moaning and groaning to himself, and the comedy of it made the fact that he’d been watching us a little less embarrassing.

“Will I ever get used to this?” Thinking back on what Reggie had said and done, I had my doubts.

As soon as I snapped out of my daze, I came to a dead stop in the middle of the corridor. I promptly beat my head against the wall a couple times in an attempt to pull myself together.

Unfortunately, Alan was there to witness it. “Have you finally lost it, Kiara?” he asked, staring at me with pity in his eyes.

No! It’s not like that!

But no matter how hard I objected, Alan wouldn’t believe me.



Isaac set out the next morning. The day after that, the Farzian army followed suit. Our destination was Fort Nazant, located in the northwestern part of Sestina.

We crept west along the high road in one giant body of over ten thousand men. We sent scouts ahead of us and took frequent stops to let our soldiers rest, so it took us a good bit of time to reach our destination. There were carriages available, so I spent the journey riding in one with Reggie, Cain, and Alan.

When I’d first heard about Fort Nazant, I had started to wonder about something: though I’d participated in several fort battles by now, I had no idea how to actually go about capturing one.

I asked Cain about it, and he replied, “The first step is to send a messenger and call for their surrender. If they refuse, the next move is either to lay siege to the stronghold and break down the gates, or else send people inside to infiltrate the fort. Failing that, the only option is to hold out and wait for the enemy to shrivel away.”

“Uh, shrivel away?”

“Or if the lord is overly stubborn, his own men might revolt against him before hitting the brink of starvation.”

“Oh, wow...”

Just imagining it sent a chill down my spine. I prayed I would never experience that level of hunger for myself.

“There’s also the option to use poison, just as His Highness did in Cassia.”

Right. Thinking back on it, nearly all of the Llewynian soldiers in

Cassia Castle were downed with poison.

“Our forces greatly outnumber the enemy’s this time around, so perhaps we should try calling for their surrender,” said Reggie. “I doubt they would have entertained the notion back at Clonfert, but that’s because calling for reinforcements was all they needed to do to tip the scales in their favor.”

Not to mention that at Clonfert, Llewynne had sent out their troops the moment they saw us coming, so there hadn’t been the option to discuss surrender in the first place.

“Miss Kiara was able to overpower them almost instantly, too. Still... I fear that going this route may be harder on her conscience in the long run.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

I gave a puzzled tilt of my head. Why did he think I was going to take it so hard?

Reggie was the one to explain. “In the event that negotiations break down, or if the enemy simply wants to give us a clear sign of their refusal, the messenger’s head may roll.”

I shuddered, and my hand flew to my own neck on instinct. “C-Can’t they just say ‘no’ like a normal person?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll fix our message to an arrow instead. It wouldn’t do to leave our most valuable warrior too upset to function. Let’s set a deadline and give them until then.” Seeing how frightened I was, Reggie gave me a pat on the head.

“How does three days from now sound?” Cain suggested.

“That sounds like the ideal amount of time on our end, but I have a feeling it will take them at least a week to come to a decision. If we don’t leave them enough time to stew, they won’t be ready to give up. Though I do wish we could finish this sooner.” Reggie then muttered, “Winter is coming, after all.”

It was getting chillier and chillier as of late. We were already set to spend a full week traveling to Sestina. Once the impending battle was over, it was likely going to take us yet another week to get the royal capital. If we wanted to waste as little time as possible, it would be in our best interest to get Llewynne to raise the white flag the moment we demanded their surrender.

That gave me an idea.

“Wait, what if I sent my golem their way?”

“Hm?” Cain glanced over at me, his eyes wide.



Sometime after that discussion, we wound our way through the mountain paths of the royal domain and made it to Sestina. The road through the border had technically been guarded by Llewynian

soldiers; fortunately, they ran for the hills when faced with a force of ten thousand men and a golem leading the charge, allowing us to pass through at our leisure.

It wasn't long after that that we arrived at Fort Nazant. The stronghold was on the smaller side. Based on the estimates of our scouts, there couldn't have been more than three thousand men inside.

Should Farzian troops draw close enough, the role of the soldiers stationed in the fort was twofold: to inform Sestina Castle of our magnitude, and to stop our forces in their tracks.

We had the option to just pass over this fort on our journey, but that would only leave them the opportunity to attack us from the rear. We feared that a surprise assault could end up costing us dearly.

And so, we chose to go on the offensive.

Reggie approved of my idea for a messenger. Once we'd laid siege to the fort in a by-the-book manner, I brought my envoys to life.

"Hahaha!" The moment he laid eyes on my creations, Reggie broke out into his first bout of laughter in quite a while. Groul's face was twitching.

"Seriously?" Alan muttered, looking downright haggard.

Emmeline, meanwhile, had sparkles in her eyes. "Amazing, Miss Kiara! I was hoping you'd come up with something like this!"

I was glad to see *someone* appreciated it.

Leaving those dubious faces and a mass of startled soldiers in their wake, Messenger Golems No. 1 and No. 2 began their march toward the fort. Reggie and I sat atop the second one's shoulder. Lila had perched herself on its opposite shoulder, now less than half the size she had been at her peak.

"An emissary, you say?!" shouted the soldiers atop the fort walls.

The reason they had figured it out before I could even say anything was because I had carved *I am an emissary here to request your surrender* in giant letters across Golem No. 1's chest. Seeing as I'd used the word "emissary," the Llewynians seemed lost as to whether or not they ought to attack.

Golem No. 1 held out a hand, and the soldiers gave a shriek. One of the knights, however, noticed that a letter had dropped from its palm and skittishly reached to pick it up.



Said letter noted that they should send their reply as soon as possible.

Hanging back a little ways behind Golem No. 1, I impatiently awaited their answer. Unfortunately, what they sent back several minutes later was a rain of arrows. We had seen this coming, so I wasn't terribly surprised.

While Lila kept the arrows at bay with a snowstorm, I pulled Golem No. 2 back and had Golem No. 1 begin grinding down the fort walls with its hands.

"It's breaking! It's breaking!"

"The arrows aren't doing anything!"

The soldiers on the wall were shooting for dear life, but it was going to take more than a measly arrow to bring my golem down.

The stones of the wall crumbled away before our very eyes. It wasn't long before the soldiers were making a run for it. One brave knight thrust his sword at my earthen titan—but unfortunately for him, the bigger it was, the more HP the golem was bound to have. It didn't so much as flinch.

I was hoping they would be feeling a little more amenable to surrender by now, but the enemy made a surprising move.

"D-Don't you care what happens to our hostage?!"

Just as I'd whittled the wall almost all the way down to the gates, Llewynian soldiers dragged another man over to an untouched portion of the wall. He had clearly been imprisoned for a while; his beard was growing wild and his hair was an unruly mess. He was wearing nothing but a plain, neutral shirt and pants, and there were no shoes on his feet.

I asked Reggie, "Do you know who that is?"

"It's hard to tell from a distance, but I assume he's a knight who was stationed in the fort. Hmm... I'll need to get a closer look at him before I can determine whether he's a VIP. May I request your assistance on that front?"

"Sure."

Reggie got to his feet alongside my golem's head, and I reached out to touch his shoulder. The moment he pointed his sword toward the fort, I let my power flow into him. Now that I'd passed along my mana, it was up to him to wield it. Lightning flew from the tip of his blade, striking down the knights who held the hostage in their grip. As they screamed and released their hold, Golem No. 1 paused its destruction of the fort to snatch up the stunned prisoner.

Despite the loss of their hostage, the Llewynians continued to haltingly fire off arrows; however, the moment Golem No. 1 kicked down the gates, they finally raised the white flag.

Something occurred to me then: perhaps we had never needed an envoy in the first place.

That marked the successful capture of Fort Nazant, but the clean-up process took significantly longer. We herded the Llewynians who had given themselves up outside the fort, but there was no telling if there were more of them lurking inside. A handful of soldiers were sent inside to check the place out. With the help of Gina and Girsch, who brought Reynard and Sara along with them, it took only three or so hours to complete the task.

We moved into the fort after that. Though the place had only just been in the hands of the enemy, if we wanted to fortify our defenses, we were safer inside of it than out.

While I holed up in my room with Lila, who had shrunk several sizes by now, Reggie and the troops kept up their work. There were plenty of pesky tasks to take care of, such as disarming the Llewynian soldiers and shipping them back to Évrard as prisoners. The captured enemies were rounded up in several pits I'd dug with my magic, so at the very least, standing guard over them wasn't *too* much of a chore.

The next day, I went up to the fort wall with Cain to do some repair work on those pits. From there, I could get a bird's-eye view of the holes I'd had my golem dig the day before. The reason I'd gone to check on them now was because I'd heard we were going to hand the POWs over to Lady Évrard the moment we joined up with her troops.

I couldn't let them go anywhere until that process was over and done with, so I had to dig a moat in preparation for a potential rainstorm. Otherwise, the pits would end up totally flooded; some of the men would float to their escape, while the ones who weren't lucky enough to know how to swim would drown.

While we were up there, Cain shared some information about the hostage from the previous day.

"He was the captain of the Farzian royal guard?"

"Yes, to His Maje—ah, His Highness's uncle. I'd seen his face several times before, so I'm quite sure of it."

"I'd figured he was just a knight who had been holed up inside the fort, like Reggie had suggested."

"As did I. His hair and beard had grown out when we saw him yesterday. As soon as he'd cleaned himself up a bit, I knew it was him."

There was no such thing as plastic surgery in this world, so unless someone's face was badly burned enough to be unidentifiable, there was no way to pass themselves off as another person. Thus, getting the man cleaned up worked toward confirming his identity, too.

That just left me with one question. "What was the captain of the royal guard doing here?"

“He *claimed* that he fled after our army’s defeat in Sestina, and only managed to make it this far before he was captured.”

There was a pretty heavy emphasis on the word “claimed.” Cain probably had his misgivings too. Considering that he hadn’t outright called it fishy, however, the explanation clearly wasn’t anything outside the realm of possibility.

I asked him just to be sure. “Is the captain of the royal guard allowed to leave the king’s side and head to the front?”

“Yes. Knights can even step in to lead the troops when their lord is indisposed.”

“Good to know. Still, it looks like you have your suspicions.”

I climbed down from the fort wall with Cain, having gathered my thoughts on how I wanted to build the moat. We headed down the stairs inside the tower and emerged into the courtyard.

“I’m not sure what Llewyn had to gain from keeping him around. If we go by his story, he asserted that he was the captain of the royal guard when he was pleading for his life, using his personal ties to His Highness to emphasize his value as a hostage. Still, one would think it would be less trouble to kill him than to keep him prisoner.”

With a sigh, Cain let his eyes slide toward the base of the main tower. When I followed his gaze, I saw a man chasing after Reggie just as he had come out into the courtyard.

“Please take me into battle with you, Your Highness!” he pleaded.

“You’ve been imprisoned for quite a while now. I’m sure that’s taken a physical toll on you, so you’re better off recuperating here in the fort. Oh, though you’re free to go home, if you’d prefer.”

“Your Highness?!”

Wow, okay. Those two definitely aren’t close.

Reggie was very openly giving him the cold shoulder, which made me realize something.

“Say, Sir Cain. How long has that man been captain of the royal guard?”

“Over ten years by now.”

That answer settled it for me; Reggie was never going to trust him. He’d probably done something to earn the prince’s animosity during the latter’s childhood years.

I must have been staring at them a little too long; the man in question noticed me looking and came running over. Cain casually stepped out in front of me. Thanks to his intervention, I was spared an up-close-and-personal encounter with the captain. The knight took one look at Cain, then stopped in his tracks a short distance away.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. You’re the Lady Spellcaster, I assume? I have a favor to—”

“I can’t help you.” I turned him down before he could even ask.

“Pardon?”

The captain sounded like I’d taken the wind right out of his sails. Picking up on what I was thinking, Cain shot him down more decisively. “His Highness isn’t the type to take back what he’s said, even at the spellcaster’s request. In fact, if he learns that you’ve been making trouble for the Lady Spellcaster, he’ll likely have you thrown out of the fort. Rather than resorting to these roundabout methods, you’d be better off continuing to appeal to him directly. Good day to you, sir.”

Having said his piece, Cain hid me from the captain’s view and shuffled us both away. When I glanced back over my shoulder at the man, I saw he was frozen in place, stunned. I almost felt sorry for him, but while I may have had the standing to give my input on hiring mercenaries, I was in no place to comment on which knights should be appointed as officers.

Moreover, I wasn’t interested in going out of my way to interact with him. If he was captain of the royal guard ten years ago, that meant he’d known Reggie since he was a little boy. If Reggie didn’t want anything to do with him, it meant he’d given the prince a reason to hate him. Most likely, he’d spent Reggie’s childhood treating him just as coldly as the king. The blatant opportunism in his about-face was enough to make me sick.

As far as *I* was concerned, that had wrapped up the whole captain incident... but two days later, I learned that it had escalated into a much bigger issue. I heard about it in a conversation with Gina and Girsch over dinner.

“You know that captain of the royal guard?” Gina said. “Uh, what was his name, again?”

“Virgil, I believe,” Girsch interjected. “He’s been spreading nasty rumors among the troops, from the sound of it.”

“Like what?” I asked, pausing just as I was about to break my bread.

Gina frowned. “That His Highness is being callous toward him or some such. He’s trying to get everyone to feel sorry for him so that somebody will go smooth things over on his behalf. He keeps insisting that he has nowhere to go and that he might lose his job if no one does anything.”

“Seriously?”

He was going to hurt Reggie’s reputation if he kept that up. If he wanted to serve the prince so badly, why was he going out of his way to get on his bad side?

Girsch provided an answer to my musings. “Hmm... He might be playing politics in hopes of getting into His Highness’s good graces after the war. He’s probably banking on His Highness bringing him

under his command in hopes of getting the rumors to stop.”

“Still, spreading gossip about the *commander-in-chief*? Those rumors could come back to bite us if they call the prince’s commands into doubt on the battlefield. Besides, I figure the whole reason His Highness is keeping him at a distance is *because* he’s the type to resort to those tricks.”

Since the two mercenaries knew the truth of the situation, they’d apparently taken the gossiping soldier to Girsch’s counseling room and given him a stern talking-to. While they were at it, they’d suggested that with someone like Reggie, it would be more productive to faithfully and politely watch over him from a distance than to incessantly follow him around.

“He seems to have taken it to heart, so hopefully that’s the end of that. But warn His Highness to be careful, won’t you, dear?” Girsch gave me a wink.



I had to go tell Reggie about this. The following day, I stopped by his room to talk. Felix, who was standing guard by the door, welcomed me inside.

Reggie’s room in the main tower contained a wooden table that was both simple and elegant and a wooden bench big enough to seat three people. There were no cushions on it, of course, but what else would you expect in a fort during wartime?

I sat down beside Reggie on said bench. He grabbed hold of my hand and refused to let go.

“Hey, uh, Reggie? Can I have my hand back?”

“Not yet. We have to get you used to this.”

“Oh, come on.”

This wasn’t the first time we had held hands. But when we were keeping it up for *this* long, and in front of other people to boot, it got a little uncomfortable.

Yep, you heard me. His lord-in-waiting, Colin, was in the room with us.

Colin was pretending not to see it. Boy, I really wished he could tell me the trick to keeping such a straight face. How could he go on serving us tea like this was nothing out of the ordinary?

“C’mon! This is really embarrassing,” I pleaded in a whisper.

His response was to kick it up a notch by lacing our fingers together. The tickle of skin rubbing against skin was making me giddy. Reggie made his intentions clear, declaring, “I’m not letting you go.”

“Why are you being so mean to me?” I asked, tears in my eyes.

Reggie’s face fell. “Do you find it so unpleasant?”

If I was being totally honest here, it was the opposite of “unpleasant.” I mean, he already *knew* I was in love with him. I just wasn’t a fan of the PDA. It sounded like Reggie wanted me to acquire a taste for it, though.

He wouldn’t even let go while we drank our tea, so I picked up the cup in my left hand. It was from the princely china set Colin had so staunchly defended throughout our campaign. Evidently, he hadn’t brought along any of the *truly* expensive porcelain for fear of what could happen on the journey, but what we had in front of us was still an elegant, clean white.

As soon as we’d drained the cups of their black tea, there came a knock on the door. Colin opened up, and in came Groul with a report for Reggie.

“The reinforcements led by Lady Évrard should be arriving shortly.”

“How far out are they?”

“About thirty minutes from the fort.”

Reggie gave a nod. “Let’s head to the gate to greet them. Kiara, you come, too.”

This got him to finally let go of my hand, so it was with great relief that I followed along.

Fort Nazant was on the smaller side, so despite our leisurely pace, it wasn’t long before we had arrived at the gates. Alan, Emmeline, Jerome, and Lord Enister were already there, so perhaps they had been informed ahead of us.

The gates were already open. A good number of soldiers who couldn’t fit inside the fort had been camping outside, but the path from the gate had been left totally clear.

The solemn march of the troops had drawn close enough that I could make out the figures at the vanguard. Groul had likely timed the announcement so that Reggie wouldn’t have to wait for too long.

It wasn’t long before the dear Lady Évrard came into view. She was riding a horse and clad in the same Évrard knight uniform that Cain was wearing. Her hair was tied back near her neck. Thinking back to the days I’d seen her regularly patrol Évrard Castle and the Farzian border, I felt a lump in my throat.

Alan must have been even happier to see her than I was. When I gave a sideways glance to check, however, his face looked terribly stiff. He was being oddly conscious of Reggie too.

Just as I was wondering what *that* was about, Reggie whispered from beside me, “By the way, do you mind if I tell Lady Évrard about us?”

I immediately grew flustered. “Uh, err...”

“I figure it might be wiser to tell her now rather than wait for her

to get suspicious and start interrogating me. My aunt is the closest relative I have left."

Wait, that's right! She is the closest living relative he has! If there's anyone he needs to present me to, it's her!

Still, hearing him ask me flat-out was making me strangely nervous. I never imagined I'd trigger a "visit your boyfriend's house and meet the family" event in the middle of a war!

But wait a second...

"Are you sure we can't keep it between the two of us?"

If we were still just in the "dating" stage, there was no reason we had to say anything. Just as I was about to submit that very cynical opinion, however, Reggie flashed me a delighted smile.

"I think it's better to tell her now than later. All *you* have to do here is stay quiet. No denying anything. Okay?"

"Um, sure."

Apparently, I didn't have to say anything at all.

While we were busy with that discussion, Lady Évrard had passed through the gate and made it all the way to Reggie. She came to a stop and bowed before the prince. "It's been quite a while, Your Highness. I've brought the reinforcements from Évrard, Bertrand, and Irvine."

Though they were family, Lady Évrard had fallen in rank when she had married the margrave. Now that the royal family had shrunk amid the national crisis, she was using her former status to get as much work done as she could, but she still had to conduct herself as Reggie's vassal.

"Thank you for making the long journey here, Aunt Beatrice. May I ask how the margrave is doing?"

"His wounds have mostly healed. He even wished to make the trip himself, but as the margrave, he had his own role to play. I'm glad to see you in good health as well, Your Highness. Has that son of mine been pulling his weight?"

When Lady Évrard glanced his way, Alan stood up straight as a rod, even more nervous than before. Considering this was his long-awaited reunion with his mother, I would've thought he'd look a little happier about it.

"Of course. He's taken quite a few troublesome tasks off my hands. As has Kiara. It was certainly worth poaching her from you."

As soon as he said my name, Lady Évrard's gaze finally shifted to me. "I'm glad to see you doing well, Kiara. I must say, I was worried about you heading into battle without so much as a sword."

Her smile was just as compassionate as it had been when she'd seen me off back in Évrard. I couldn't keep my eyes from watering. I tried to take a step toward her, only for Reggie to grab me by the

hand. My shoulders jumped in surprise.

"Fear not, Auntie. I'm always keeping a careful eye on her. Though I'm afraid to admit she was taken captive by the enemy at one point."

I did my best to keep myself from squealing. *No, no, no! If I make a sound, it'll just alert all the people who haven't noticed we're holding hands yet!*

Cold sweat dripping from my forehead, I tried to hold out.

"I won't let there be a second time. She's very precious to me, you see."

I had to stop myself from screaming yet again. *Did you really just say that in front of EVERYONE?! I mean, he kept it vague enough that someone could take that as "precious as a military asset," but not Lady Évrard! She blinked when he said it, and now she's staring down at our joined hands!*

That was when I finally understood what he'd meant. If this was the way he wanted to break the news, of course he didn't mind if I kept quiet. Lady Évrard clearly understood that there was a very personal implication to his words.

Look, now she's flashing us a suggestive smile!

"Oh, I have a lot of questions to ask you. You too, of course, Lady Spellcaster."

Reggie finally let go of my hand, and the tension bled out of me. When I glanced sideways and my eyes locked with Alan's—whose face said, *Great, now they've gone and done it*—I all but wilted. Alan had clearly known this was going to happen. That explained why he'd looked so nervous, even though it technically wasn't his problem.

If he knew, I really wish he would have told me.

Nevertheless, Lady Évrard was quite busy that day. She had to discuss how the prisoners were to be treated, and she had to work out a plan to send sick or injured soldiers to the rear. Thus, it wasn't until the following day that I got the chance to talk with her. Naturally, she had plenty of questions for me.

"So? When did he tell you? And how?"

"Umm..."

"I have a guess, Lady Évrard. I bet it was soon after she was taken captive," remarked Maya, who had accompanied the margravine all this way and was now ganging up on me with her mistress. There was nowhere to run from their combined assault.

Master Horace, my most dependable ally in a situation like this, was nowhere to be found. He had demanded I leave him in my room the second he heard Maya was here. I had no choice but to fend for myself.

Did Master Horace hate getting dressed up that much? Since we're in

the middle of a war, I doubt Maya brought much with her, anyway.

Much like Lady Évrard, Maya was wearing a knight uniform and had her hair tied back. “Ready for a fight” was certainly one way to describe her. Given that there were traces of blood left on her clothes, it was clear she had already done her fair share of clashing swords.

I resigned myself to my fate and began my rambling account of what had happened. Lady Évrard and Maya listened to the whole story with grins on their faces. It seemed Reggie had already filled them in on the details; I skimmed over a few parts, but they didn’t pester me for the specifics, thankfully.

Reflecting fondly on Reggie’s behavior just earlier, Lady Évrard said, “Bringing it up by the gates gave me the opportunity to ask him for an explanation after our meeting. He set things up so *he* could be the first to share what had happened, meaning we wouldn’t barrage you with quite so many questions.”

She had a point. There had been no time to discuss such personal affairs on the day she arrived. She probably would have found out about us before we even had the chance to bring it up. And if she wanted to find out what had happened between us, it would have made more sense to go straight to me than interrogate the prince.

Lady Évrard let out a sigh. “I’ve known for a while now that His Highness was very taken with you.”

“Huh?”

“You’re the first girl he’s ever paid attention to.”

I was surprised to hear that. Reggie had always seemed, well, accustomed to dealing with girls. I’d assumed he must have courted several women before. In fact, that was part of why I’d convinced myself not to take his attention too seriously.

“I’d always thought he would live his life without depending on anyone. Perhaps it was difficult for him because of his relationship with his parents and grandfather; he grew up to be a rather aloof boy. Still, I was afraid a life like that might be too painful for him to bear, so I’m truly glad he found someone to love.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. While I sat there squirming uncomfortably, she went on, “Besides, what with you being a spellcaster, there’s no need to worry about you meeting the same fate as his mother. You know how to fight.”

“Ah... Did you hear about Queen Linese?”

Lady Évrard must have known Reggie’s mother, too.

She nodded. “I heard from Reggie. It’s horrible what happened to her. She was always so kind to me too. I haven’t the slightest clue why my father was so fussed over her. But... it’s also my fault for believing her when she said she was okay.”

Lady Évrard clenched her hands into fists. “So, if you’re planning

to stay by Reggie's side forevermore, tell me if there's anything I can ever do for you. I'm sure there are plenty of things that can't be solved with magic. I'll make sure you don't end up like Linesse. Of course, if we come out of this victorious, no one is going to jump to criticize His Highness or his number one benefactor for some time. That's the one good thing about his timing in ascending to the throne."

True. If we won this war, that would make Reggie a hero. Not a single noble would dare to stand against the prince once he'd liberated our country. Unless he made an awfully big mistake in the subsequent administration, his defeat of Llewyrne and Queen Marianne ought to serve him for his entire reign. As a close aide of his, it didn't seem likely that *I* would be attacked just for being a spellcaster, either.

"When you become queen, my husband and I will offer you all the help you need."

"What?! Queen?!"

"Are you really that surprised? I thought you were courting Reggie."

"Well, sure..."

If I stayed with Reggie long enough after he became king, I would eventually be presented with the option to become his queen. I knew that, of course, but it sounded so unrealistic that I'd put off thinking about it. Besides, I wasn't confident I could do it.

"Being queen is a pretty hard job, isn't it? Besides, am I even a high enough rank for that?"

I had heard that Queen Linesse had been a daughter of nobility too. Queen Marianne was a former princess. No matter how you spun it, a high standing in society was non-optional here.

Or so I'd thought, but Lady Évrard just laughed at me. "There's no point thinking about all that."

"There isn't?"

"This is Reggie we're talking about. If that's what he wants, he'll make careful preparations to ensure you can sit by his side, no matter what your rank is. Don't you think so?" She giggled.

I had to agree with her. It was easy to be fooled by his mild demeanor and appearance, but Reggie was pretty stubborn. If he said he was going to do something, nothing could make him back down—and he'd pull it off so neatly you'd never know he'd had to force his way through.

It was a relief to hear that my status and abilities weren't going to be a factor.

After I'd made it back to my room with renewed peace of mind, the fact that I was putting such serious thought into becoming Reggie's queen when he hadn't even *asked* me yet was abruptly embarrassing enough to make me shriek.

I flopped down on my bed, flailing like crazy while Master Horace had a good laugh at my expense. Once I'd gotten that out of my system, I decided to put those thoughts on hold for a while. If everyone didn't make it out of this war alive, none of it would even matter.

Lady Évrard and her troops were afforded a day of rest after that. The following day, we set out.

Our destination was the plains of Sestina. It was the place where the king's troops had lost to Llewyn in the summer—and where Lord Patriciél was most likely waiting for us.

We had wanted to wait until Isaac and his troops returned, but it was going to take a good bit of time for them to go all the way to the territory of Patriciél and back. Upon word that they were lagging two days behind us, we decided to go ahead and take the lead.

Interlude: A Sacrificial Bird

“Please explain yourself immediately!” shouted a Llewynian general by the name of Damian, chasing down Queen Marianne alongside his knights.

There was a good reason they had forced their way into the audience chamber demanding an explanation. King Bernhardt of Llewyrne had entrusted his troops to Damian, but just as they had completed their voyage and arrived at the royal capital, Queen Marianne had snatched them up. Her intent was to send each and every one of them to Farzia’s count of Patriciél. In which case, why even have them come all the way to Farzia in the first place?

Damian had come to Farzia in the king’s stead, planning to play his cards just right—all to shift the responsibility for the invasion’s inevitable failure onto Queen Marianne.

While they had successfully killed Farzia’s king and seized the royal capital, Prince Reginald was currently poised to turn the tables. Initially, Llewyrne had believed that killing the heir to the throne would bring the rebellious Farzian nobility under their heel. Unfortunately for them, Queen Marianne had failed to strike down the prince, and now the Llewynian army was doomed to meet its demise on Farzian soil.

King Bernhardt had concluded that conquering Farzia was going to prove difficult. Meanwhile, he sensed that the timing was right to frame it as though Queen Marianne had tricked Llewyrne into its invasion. Perhaps, for example, he could claim: *She told us that, having unlocked the secret to creating spellcasters, Farzia was making preparations to conquer Llewyrne.* Or even: *We were told that Lord Credias’s reason for defecting to our side was that Queen Marianne had talked him out of destroying Llewyrne.* The possibilities were endless.

Damian had come to Farzia to assess the right time to withdraw their troops, only to be met with the news that Queen Marianne had proclaimed her own ascension to the throne, along with a letter from the queen herself.

I have a plan to kill the prince.

It would have been terribly easy to spin that letter as proof that the queen had hoodwinked them. Not only that, but she had declared herself the new ruler, making it that much easier to claim that the invasion had been carried out under *her* orders and that Llewyrne had

merely been dragged in to help. If the invasion failed, they could lay all the blame at her feet.

Upon reaching that conclusion, King Bernhardt had sent the soldiers Queen Marianne had requested. It would have taken too long to make the trek from the Salekhardian border by foot, so they had sailed instead. The men he had deployed were slaves from a conquered nation to the east.

Unfortunately, said soldiers had immediately been dragged off to Sestina by one of the nobles under Queen Marianne's command. Deprived of his forces, Damian had been left behind in the royal capital with only a handful of men. This had thrown a wrench in his war-ending plan to feign a fight against Farzia, only to get in touch with them behind the scenes and convince them that Queen Marianne had been responsible for everything.

"I was told that you asked for me by name, Your Majesty. That was part of the reason why His Majesty chose to send *me*, and I came here with every intention of facing Farzia. But how am I meant to take action like this?!"

Queen Marianne remained gracefully seated upon her throne, one leg crossed over the other. Calmly reaching her hand toward a giant birdcage sitting beside her, she replied, "I summoned you here because you have a very important role to play, General Damian. Furthermore, those slaves come from a land under *your* jurisdiction. If I hoped to borrow them, of course you were the best person to ask."

"Well, I suppose..."

It was Damian who had conquered that small nation east of Llewyrne. It was one of the countries Llewyrne had been most eager to get its hands on, given its ocean border and ports. Damian had gone on to serve as acting governor of the territory following its capture. Thus, what Queen Marianne was saying didn't ring false, per se.

"Besides, I have a question I've been meaning to ask you for some time now."

Queen Marianne opened the door to the birdcage with a sweeping gesture. Inside was a viridescent bird. Long-tailed and large enough that the queen would have to hold it with both arms, it was an elegant sight to behold.

"And what question is that?" He was so unnerved that he all but hiccuped the last word.

The queen reached a hand into the cage, only for the bird to peck at her fingers with its pointed beak. As the tip of its bill punctured and dug into her flesh, blood soon began to drip from her digits.

"Your Majesty?!"

Just as Damian made to rush to her side, Queen Marianne asked in a tranquil voice, "Why didn't you attest to Lord Loutis's

innocence?"

"What? Loutis?"

"My once-betrothed. He served as your adjutant quite some time ago. Surely you haven't forgotten? Just think of all those trips we went on together." Marianne dispassionately strung her words together. "But when it was determined that I would be married off to Farzia, he was accused of defiling me prior to our marriage and executed for his 'crimes.' You testified against him then. Why?"

Damian pursed his lips. He couldn't tell Queen Marianne the truth.

To prevent her fiancé, Loutis, from facing execution for his part in Llewyn's defeat, Marianne had agreed to marry into the Farzian royal family. Unfortunately, Loutis still presented a liability in the eyes of King Bernhardt. After all, there was a chance the man had witnessed the king assassinate his own younger brother in the heat of battle.

"Had my brother not had his fill of revenge for our loss?" Queen Marianne spoke with the assumption that her brother had put him up to it. All the while, her bird lapped up droplets of blood from her fingertips. "I knew that Bernhardt had always seen Arnold as an obstacle. He was afraid that his little brother, talented as he was, might one day usurp his position."

Damian held his tongue. Marianne was exactly right. That was the reason the king had abruptly ordered a second invasion attempt back then: he had wanted to set the stage to stealthily bump off his younger brother, Arnold, who was more popular with both the nobility and the common folk than himself. Arnold had been left with no choice but to throw himself into a war he couldn't hope to win, and Llewynian insiders had worked to prevent him from meeting the conditions necessary to negotiate for a truce.

Marianne's fiancé, Loutis, had been Arnold's best friend. Though the prince had been successfully eliminated, there was a chance Loutis knew of the assassination. Threatened by the possibility, King Bernhardt had been desperate to see Loutis executed.

Thus, Damian had been granted the rank of general in exchange for his false testimony.

"Come now, tell me. Why did you let Lord Loutis die?"

Queen Marianne, who had been gazing at her bird throughout this whole exchange, finally cast a glance over at Damian, who had come to a dead stop where he stood. When she turned her stare on the knights behind him and let out a laugh, the bird flew from its cage.

It exploded into a creature of enormous proportions, letting out a cry as it tore through the air. In that very same moment, Damian and his knights saw an eddy of flame hurtle toward them.

That became their last living memory.

Chapter 3: Battle on the Sestina Plains

Sestina's eastern region was made up of vast plains.

The lands near the castle had once been barren, but after much irrigation and cultivation, the area was now Farzia's leading farm belt. Llewyrne must have known that if they trampled over those croplands, the effects on next year's harvest would come back to bite them during their future reign; back when they had fought the royal army during the summer, they had picked a desolate area some distance from those fields as their battleground. This time, too, the Llewynians had positioned themselves in a barren wasteland to await our arrival.

"It looks like the enemy troops are largely made up of Llewynian soldiers this time," Lady Évrard remarked. "Lucky for us."

"Did you run into trouble in Kilrea?" Reggie asked.

She nodded, her face drawn into a frown. "Yes. Llewynians were the minority there. The Delphion men were prepared for such an eventuality, so they handled themselves alright. The rest of our troops had a much harder time of it, however. The enemy had gone to the effort of dyeing their capes, so it was a simple matter of striking down all those who turned their swords on you... but it certainly wasn't a pleasant confrontation." She then grumbled, "That was what put us behind schedule, I'm afraid."

Somehow, Lady Évrard seemed more hawkish than ever. Perhaps that was the inevitable result of seeing Évrard invaded. *I'd* only lived there for two years, and it had still hurt to see my home laid to waste. Plus, Lady Évrard had her husband's injuries weighing on her too. I was pretty sure I wasn't just imagining the hatred in her eyes when it came to Llewyrne.

She was decked out in her breastplate and gauntlets. Her silver locks, the same hue as Reggie's, were pinned high upon her head. Looking gallant and gorgeous as her blue cape fluttered in the wind, she was the picture of a goddess.

Maya and the knights of Évrard were busy escorting a handful of people away from their lady. Among them was Virgil, the man who had been held prisoner at Fort Nazant. The former captain of the royal guard and the soldiers under his command had disregarded Reggie's orders to stay in the fort and instead followed us out into battle. From the sound of it, Virgil had slipped into the crowd with the help of a

knight who was an old acquaintance of his.

With a force of 20,000 men, we couldn't keep an eye on everything. If he had kept his mouth shut, we never would have known he was there—but wouldn't you know it, his men had to go and accost Lady Évrard, immediately alerting us to their presence.

"Allow me to fight by your side!" Virgil had begged her.

Reggie had cut in with, "Strange. I could have sworn your injuries hadn't healed yet."

Lady Évrard had then shot him down. "An injured man is no use on the battlefield. Hang back, if you would."

By the end of the encounter, Maya had shouted to the surrounding knights, "Let's hand them over to the rescue squad!"

Now they were in the process of dragging the men down from the hilltop upon which Reggie and Lady Évrard stood. I was pretty impressed by how deftly Maya was escorting them away.

Meanwhile, we called our march to a halt a good distance from the Llewynian troops. We still had a ways to go before the enemy would even be in range of our archers on the front lines.

This wasn't normal procedure, mind you. Our goal was to waste as little time as possible. Lord Patriciél, on the other hand, would be perfectly happy to let this drag on until winter, when we'd be forced to suspend hostilities. So long as Farzia didn't open fire, Lord Patriciél was no doubt prepared to hold his front lines until the first snowfall of the year.

However, Reggie had said, "If we have a way to force the enemy's hand, *and* it would put us at a greater advantage, obviously we should be using it." And with that, he had handed me my orders.

Once we were lined up and ready to go, I moved toward the front lines with Cain and Master Horace. The 500 soldiers at the vanguard divided themselves up into five groups around lines I'd drawn in the ground, huddled together, and waited for the next step.

I glanced back at Reggie, and when he raised his hand in a signal, I cast my magic.

"Let's go!"

I raised the ground under our archers' feet, which materialized into a thick stone slab with a set of wheels. Since I'd given them an explanation and a practice run beforehand, the men calmly sprang right into action. I built walls all around them, leaving them a small window in the front to see through. And with that, it was go time.

"Our mobile archer unit is a-go!"

The wheels began to turn. Loaded into their makeshift stone tank, the archers hurtled straight toward the enemy.

Of course, we weren't about to have them rush all the way in. Once they'd drawn close enough for their arrows to reach enemy lines,

one of the men toward the back gave a purposeful wave of his hand, and I brought them to a stop.

From there, the archers began firing their arrows. The enemy responded with arrows of their own, naturally, but all I had to do was pull the tank back a smidge to make sure they bounced off the stone walls. Our tank was, in practice, a mobile wall of archers. So long as the enemy didn't move in for a close-range attack, it was open season until we ran out of arrows.

I *had* figured they could counter us with defective spellcasters, but given their indiscriminate style of attack, those were most effective when tossed into the middle of a crowd. For lack of any better options, Lord Patriciél's troops were sure to advance. This was all part of our calculations.

It wasn't long before his troops began their forward march, just as we had predicted. Yet for some reason, the archers in the stone tank had yet to give me the signal to retreat. Based on the way their heads were jerking back and forth, it looked like there was some kind of commotion going on in there.

"What should we do, Sir Cain, Master Horace? Something's off."

"Let's pull them back. The delay could be due to a problem they've encountered. If we leave them like this, they're going to end up in close combat with the enemy."

At Cain's prompting, I rolled the stone tank back. The enemy followed after them like fish taking the bait. Once they had drawn close enough, however, I realized there was something odd about the enemy's formation.

Of the five neat rows of their frontline troops, only three were marching forward. The men at the head of the charge weren't wearing black capes. Whenever one of them fell, the others continued their march, dragging the corpse along with them.

"What's going on?" Cain muttered, his brow furrowing.

"Guess Llewyn decided to bring out slaves as their meat shields," Master Horace all but groaned.

As I listened to their exchange, the term "human shields" rose to my mind.

Our reconnaissance unit had informed us that Llewyn had transported slaves along with their troops. At the time, however, we had naively assumed they would be putting them on the front lines to serve as close-range fighters. The sight of those slaves pressing onward no matter how many of their companions fell must have left our archers terribly disturbed.

While I steadily drew the archers back, Cain sent a nearby soldier off to Reggie with a message. He came back with the prince's orders almost immediately.

To prevent the enemy from getting any closer to us than we wanted, we kept the frontline infantry planted right where we had discussed. Once I'd moved the archers behind those foot soldiers, Cain gave me a ride on his horse, and together we moved right up close to the tank. We'd be able to get a better look at what was happening from there.

When we pulled up, I hopped back down to the ground and started searching for where my copper ore had landed. I'd asked the archers to scatter it around when they were shooting their arrows. I scouted out the most opportune spots, then cast my spell.

To start, I targeted the pikemen lined up behind the slaves by forming humps under their feet, sending them rolling, and effectively splitting them up.

"Sorry, but it's time for you guys to take a fall!"

Next, I made holes to drop the slaves into, resigned to the fact that they were going to get at least a little hurt in the process.

"They're going to get hit with our arrows if you leave them like that, Miss Kiara."

"On it!"

I rushed to cover up the pits with a slab of stone. I felt bad locking them away in total darkness, but this *was* an emergency evacuation, so I needed them to bear with it for now. I then tried the same trick on all three of the Llewynian units.

You see, Reggie had given me orders to rescue the slaves. Of course, we couldn't afford to leave an opening for the Llewynian soldiers behind them, so our archers kept on firing their arrows all the while.

The more time passed, the more slaves lost their lives. I'd managed to trap the third unit in a hole and separate them from the rest of the Llewynians, but I had to wonder just how many of them had made it down there alive.

At this point, the front lines were turning into a free-for-all struggle. No matter how many slaves they lost, Llewyn's vanguard pressed onward.

"Focus on taking out the rear units, Miss Kiara."

"Got it."

The Llewynian troops in the rear were now likewise on the move. The head of their forces was composed of the same slave-foot soldier mix we'd seen in the other units.

From atop a tall platform just behind our frontline soldiers—a modified version of the tank I'd made—I tried giving them the same treatment as the other units. Unfortunately, there were way too many of them.

The slaves were large enough in number to make Cain mutter,

“Just how many men did they cart along?”

The amount of slaves Lord Patriciél had brought with him nearly rivaled the entirety of his infantry. Lord Patriciél’s troops numbered about 20,000, and from what we could estimate at a glance, there were about 10,000 slaves.

Our cavalry slashed their way through the front lines again and again. However, we refrained from forcing the Llewynians back in one big push. Instead, I would create an opportunity to separate the slaves from the rest of the pack, then our men would back off, only to charge back in yet again. The front lines were steadily falling back toward the Farzian ranks, but there wasn’t much we could do about that.

There was a good reason why we had chosen that tactic: Llewynne had a wealth of contract stones. But as long as we put on a show of being forced back, the enemy wouldn’t resort to using the ace up their sleeve. In the meantime, we just had to take custody of their go-to defective spellcaster potentials, the slaves.

Unfortunately, there was a limit to what I could do.

“We’re going to run out of copper ore soon, Sir Cain!” The copper ore I had asked the archers to sprinkle over the battlefield for me was falling into short supply.

“Let’s clear out two more units, then fall back for now,” Cain suggested.

I nodded. It was right then, however, that a knight came barreling for the front lines.

“Miss Kiara!”

Someone suddenly tugged me back by the arm. I slammed hard against a stone surface, only to find myself safely sandwiched between Cain’s back and the wall behind me. The first sound I heard was the light clang of iron, followed by the metallic screech of blade crashing against blade. From where Cain was shielding me behind him, I could see how taut his arms and shoulders were.



I couldn't do anything until I knew what had just happened. And so, I peeked out from around Cain's side.

"What?"

The man Cain was clashing swords with was a Farzian knight—though he had jumped down from his horse and was now standing on the platform with us.

"Though I bear you no grudge, I'm afraid I must have you die, Lady Spellcaster!"

I recognized the man, to boot.

He drew back his sword, only to bring it down on me once more. Cain knocked the weapon out of his hands with tremendous force, tore through the man's arm, and stabbed his blade through a gap in the assailant's armor for good measure.

"I know you still have the strength to speak. Tell me: why are you doing this? Are you working with the former king's knight-guard, Virgil?" Cain asked, his sword still thrust deep into the man's flesh.

The man who had attacked me was, indeed, one of the soldiers who had been held prisoner alongside Virgil.

Unfortunately, we never managed to get an answer out of him. As an anguished expression rose to his face, the soldier drew a knife from around his waist. Taking advantage of the moment Cain jerked away, he thrust the knife into his neck and took his own life.

"Wha...?"

Why would he do that?! Did he assume his attempt on my life had sealed his fate either way?

While I stood there stunned, Cain gathered me up in his arms and carried me away. "Let's retreat for now, Miss Kiara. This area is too lightly defended."

Now that knights and soldiers had begun to gather, noticing that something had gone wrong, Cain started handing out orders and sending men off every which way with messages. Farzia's greatest weapon, its spellcaster, was about to leave the front lines. That was certainly worth reporting.

A knight galloped off to inform Reggie of the assassination attempt.

Wait a second, though. If it was one of Virgil's men who attacked me, what does that say about the man himself? Is he on our side? If he is an enemy, who would he go after first?

"Sir Cain, I'm worried about Reggie."

"So am I. That said, I just sent him a message, and he ought to have Groul and the rest of his knights with him. He should be fine... but nevertheless, let us make haste."

Cain helped me onto a horse he'd kept around nearby, and

together we headed off to go find Reggie.

My heart was pounding like crazy the whole way over. Now that Reggie was in danger of being assassinated yet again, I almost had to wonder: could it be that the very world itself was conspiring to kill him? I certainly hoped not. We *were* in the middle of a war, and perhaps being king in such a conflict-ridden world simply made him an obvious target.

But I was still worried. After all, I remembered losing him once before—not just in my memories of the RPG, but in my memories as “the Kiara who never escaped,” too.

Cain must have known how nervous this was going to make me. Here he was taking me to go see Reggie, even though there was no urgent need to do so.

By the time we made it over to the main body, we found our ranks in chaos. When I spotted Reggie, I saw that Virgil was closing in on him. Dozens of people lay injured around them. The majority of Reggie’s knights were off engaged in fights of their own, leaving only Felix by his side.

Unfortunately, Felix’s attention had been grabbed by a soldier dashing toward him from behind. I spotted another soldier hoping to cash in on the opportunity, aiming an arrow at the now-unguarded prince from afar. It was yet another one of the soldiers who had been held captive alongside Virgil.

No one else had noticed him there yet. Worse, whether I tried building a wall with my magic or running over to shield Reggie myself, I wasn’t going to make it in time to stop him.

“Master Horace!”

I chucked Master Horace into the air with all my mana and might.

“Whaaaaa?!”

The doll soared through the air, kicking up gales in his wake—and hurtling straight toward the soldier drawing his bow. Just as the arrow flew free, it was swallowed up into the windstorm, smacked right into my mentor’s clay body, and plummeted to the ground. Master Horace, meanwhile, continued careening through the air after the soldier ducked out of his path.

That alerted everyone else to the archer’s presence. Everyone jumped to apprehend him, but the soldier responded by swallowing something and transforming into a defective spellcaster in the blink of an eye.

When I saw the flames begin to gush from his body, I screamed, “Everyone, get away from him!”

I hopped down from my horse, then swiftly manipulated the earth to trap the soldier-turned-defective spellcaster under the soil.

Meanwhile, the fight against Virgil and his men was drawing to a

close. Reggie intercepted Virgil's attack and slashed through his leg, while Groul skewered the man through the arm and robbed him of the means to fight back. Soldiers were apprehended one after the other, and Felix cut down the man who had charged at him from behind.

Before bothering with anything else, I went to go check out the arrow that had dropped to the earth. A soldier picked it up and handed it over to me. Once I'd taken a closer look at it, I saw that there was indeed contract stone powder pasted over the tip.

While I was busy examining the arrow, Reggie tracked me down. "If you came back all this way, I take it you ran into trouble on your end as well."

Cain answered for me. "Yes. Someone made an attempt on Miss Kiara's life, too—though I made swift work of him. He was one of Virgil's men."

Following a nod of acknowledgment, Reggie's expression darkened. "Wait here for the time being, Kiara. We'll have the frostfoxes hold the front lines in your stead. I don't doubt that the enemy purposely left Virgil in that fort to assassinate us after we'd taken him into custody. I'm sure this was all a part of Patriciél's plan."

Reggie walked up to the apprehended Virgil. He was moaning in agony, his arm still pinned to the ground by Groul's blade.

"Was Lord Patriciél the one who put you up to the task? My, he really put you through the wringer, locking you up just to make you look like his captive. What did you ask for in exchange? Start talking, and I might be amenable to having you healed."

The former captain continued to groan in pain, but otherwise insisted on keeping his mouth shut.

"Oh, I see. You were in debt. He must have given you enough money to wipe the slate clean."

Virgil looked like he could hardly believe what he was hearing. "How did you—?"

"I've gathered quite a bit of information on you and your ilk in preparation for one day ousting you alongside the king. Not that any of that turned out to be necessary, of course. If that was the deal you made, why did you bother coming all the way to Sestina?"

"For my wife... and daughter. Llewyn said I had a good shot at infiltrating the Farzian army."

It sounded like his loved ones had been taken hostage, and he'd subsequently been ordered to deliver Farzia a heavy blow.

Since he *had* technically answered our questions, Reggie ordered that his wounds be treated. By this point, however, it was a coin toss as to whether that would save him. He had already lost so much blood that he was white as a sheet, lying listlessly on the ground.

Now that I knew how everything had ended up, I turned to take

my leave. Reggie immediately stopped me in my tracks.

“Where are you going, Kiara?”

“Err, I sent Master Horace flying not long ago, so I need to go look for him.”

No sooner had I answered his question than a frostfox wearing a blue ribbon—Reynard—came bounding up to us.

“Aghhh! I’m covered in dog slobber!” came Master Horace’s cry.

Upon taking a closer look, I saw that Reynard was carrying Master Horace in his mouth. When I took him back, there was clearly only a little drool on him.

“Thanks, Reynard. And c’mon, Master Horace, this is practically nothing. You’ll be fine if I wipe you dry, and you should be grateful he brought you back in the first place.”

“He ate me alive...”

Though his clay expression was unchanging as ever, he somehow managed to look like he was crying in terror. What a card.

While I was occupied with consoling my wailing mentor, Llewyn began its gradual retreat, just as Reggie had predicted. For today, at least, it seemed things had ended in a draw.



After that, it was my time to shine.

We had to dig out all the men who had been buried beneath the soil. I’d been sure to leave them vents, of course, but we *had* left them trapped in the pitch dark for almost an hour. They were probably scared out of their wits.

Although we were a good distance from where Llewyn had set up camp, I took a bodyguard along to the scene just to be on the safe side. Once I’d peeled back the earthen ceiling and formed a simple ramp, other soldiers helped guide the slaves back up to the ground.

We cut the ropes on the dead slaves and left them down in the hole. I planned to bury them there once everyone else had made it to the surface.

The enslaved men neither put up a struggle nor tried to run. They simply followed our orders and trudged along, their expressions glum.

Only a select few of them walked with their heads held high. Those ones were all pretty young. There were about ten of them, ranging in age from boys to men in their thirties. Amid the sea of people who seemed to have forgotten how to so much as hang their heads and cry, it was hard not to notice them.

When Alan and Reggie appeared on the scene, careful to keep a safe distance, those men moved to the head of the pack and started asking questions.

“Are you this army’s commander-in-chief?”

When he saw the amused look on Reggie's face, Alan took a step forward and answered them, his expression blank. "That's right. I'm in charge around here."

While this was a conversation they needed to have, they were likely wary of a potential surprise attack; thus, Alan had stepped forward in Reggie's place.

The young slave replied, "I'd like to know what you plan on doing with us. Seeing as you opted not to slaughter us in battle, I assume you have some sort of use for us."

"Frankly speaking? Yes, we do. And of course, we expect you to do as we say. It doesn't look like you have much of a choice either way."

Cold as Alan's response was, it was the truth. Seeing as their role was to serve as human shields, they had simply been thrown into whatever clothes were readily on hand, and their shoes were nearly worn through. Soldiers generally kept emergency rations on them, but these men likely didn't even have that. Running meant they would simply starve to death. If they resorted to robbing a nearby village, they would eventually get caught and killed.

Perhaps they weren't trying to get away because they knew that. Still, it was weird how compliant they were being. With how well disciplined they were, it was almost like they were following someone's orders, no matter how listlessly they were going about it.

Don't tell me they've made some sort of secret pact with Lord Patriciel. Still, would they be willing to let their fellow countrymen die just for that? Who would agree to that knowing it might cost them their own life?

While I was puzzling everything over, Alan pushed the conversation onward. "We're going to send you back to your home country."

"What?"

The slaves' eyes went wide as saucers. Even the ones who had been lifelessly staring at the ground lifted their heads in surprise. The only thing a slave was ever ordered to do in the middle of a war was to fight, after all.

"You're not... going to have us fight?" the young man asked, dumbfounded. Who could have blamed him?

"We *will* send you out into the next battle. Not as shields, however. We want you to reach out to the rest of Llewyn's slaves. Help us bring your comrades over to our side. That's our best move to whittle down the enemy's numbers. After that, we'll send you back home."

"Are you serious?" asked the young slave standing at the head of the group.

Alan nodded. "There's too many of you for us to manage, anyway."

We don't have the resources to keep you fed. There is one condition, however. We're going to send you home with weapons in hand. In exchange, take a stand and fight off the Llewynians who have occupied your home."

Even I was surprised to hear that part of it. The slaves were left absolutely stunned.

"How... How did you know Llewyn invaded our home?"

"We looked into it when conducting our reconnaissance. You're from the Kingdom of Toldi, yes? Surely you hold a grudge against Llewyn. Whether your family was killed or likewise turned into slaves, you ought to have plenty of reason to take a sword in hand and take back your country. I'm confident you will agree to our terms."

Alan looked out at the gathering of slaves. "If you *don't* wish to go home, however, I'm afraid we can't take you on ourselves. We'll find something else to do with you. Furthermore, we need you to come to a decision here and now. If I had to guess, you lot were in charge of organizing the freshly transferred slaves?" He turned his gaze toward a teenage boy standing behind the leader. "And *he* must be either a member of the Toldi royal family, or else a noble with royal blood."

The man's eyes went wide. He didn't show anything more on his face than that, but the two men standing alongside the boy behind him seemed to panic, stepping in to protect him.

"Looks like I was right on the money. I can tell you were doing your best to hide it, but before we took you into our custody, there were several men positioning themselves to keep him defended."

The leader hung his head, left with no choice but to acknowledge what Alan was saying.

I'd had no idea about any of this, so I was genuinely surprised. At the same time, I finally understood why the slaves had seemed so organized. Leaving aside whether the boy's identity was public knowledge or not, the men around him had taken charge of the rest of the slaves—all so that they could find the right opportunity to let the boy escape, whether that be alongside everyone else or all on his own.

Eventually, the boyish ward took a step forward. Brown-haired and even younger than Alan, he looked the latter straight in the eye and said, "I am fifth in line to the throne of Toldi. My name is Lux. I will handle the negotiations here."

"Milord," the leader murmured. Based on his reaction, this Lux boy seemed to be the son of a duke. Considering how desperate the others had been to let him get away, it was likely that everyone else in line to the throne had been killed.

"If you're willing to grant us weapons and safe return home, we will gladly accept your offer. We have no reason not to raise an army of our own. Particularly now that Llewyn has diverted a great deal of

their forces to Farzia, their defenses in Toldi are bound to be weakened. What I don't understand is what's in it for you."

Why would you show us such kindness? was the boy's implicit question.

Reggie was the one to answer him. "It's an investment toward the future. Once we've brought stability to our country, we will have to lead an assault on Llewynne somewhere down the line. We'd like to weaken them in preparation for that eventuality."

"I see now. You want to undermine Llewynne's power as a nation."

The boy seemed to understand what Reggie was getting at.

I drew my lips into a thin line when Reggie said we would have to attack Llewynne. By the time we brought this war of aggression to an end, all we would have really done was kick the invaders out of our country. We wouldn't have had a chance to properly retaliate, and there was a good chance Llewynne wasn't going to quietly hand over their reparations.

This wasn't going to be the last time we went to war. Once Llewynne got back on its feet, there was no telling what tricks they might resort to next. Thus, we had no choice but to crush them once and for all... or perhaps convert their king into one of our adherents.

Despite my mixed feelings on the matter, I knew I would always find my way to the battlefield regardless.



That marked the end of the first battle. The slaves agreed to the conditions we'd set. We all gathered where Farzia had set up camp, ate dinner, and went to sleep.

It was the middle of the night when Lord Patriciél launched his assault.

"Wake up! We're under attack!" Not long after I'd finally fallen asleep, I sprang to my feet, awakened by Cain's voice.

It was dark out; dawn hadn't broken yet. I could just barely make out Cain's figure in the faint moonlight as he came barging into my tent.

I hurried to get up, hanging Master Horace in his usual spot at my waist. I always slept fully clothed when we were in the midst of a battle, so once I'd put on my shoes and grabbed my mentor, I was ready to go.

Even so, I was apparently dawdling too much for Cain's liking. "Let's get you somewhere safe," he said, grabbing me by the wrist and taking off in a hurry.

Once we had stepped outside, the uproar rang louder in my ears. Gina and the knights of Évrard, who had been maintaining a protective ring around our camp, were nowhere to be seen, and I

could hear shouts and the sounds of swords clashing from afar.

“Did the enemy sneak up on us?!”

“We noticed them coming, so we managed to return their fire. Unfortunately for us, the enemy resorted to some rather nasty tricks.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

As he walked his horse through the darkness, Cain replied with an unusual amount of distaste, “In a night raid, the enemy has two options: either get as close as possible without our noticing and force us back in one fell swoop, or attack with only a handful of men under the cover of night. This time around, they combined both methods.”

They had taken down the soldiers on patrol, and worse yet, the dim light of the moon meant nobody had noticed them right away. As soon as they were spotted closing in from the forest, however, Reggie and his knights had launched their counterattack.

Unfortunately, that was when the enemy had brought out their slaves once again.

“When it’s this dark out, it’s easy to slip up and accidentally kill one of your allies on the front lines; hence, surprise attacks are generally carried out in smaller numbers. In this case, however, Llewynne was relying on their slaves. If you position your thralls in front of you during the charge, the enemy will target them first. All that’s left to do then is take advantage of that moment to strike down your opponent. Even if you were to mistake your kill, it’s going to be either a slave or an enemy standing before you. That’s what allowed them to rush us in the middle of the night, heedless of the consequences.”

By turning their slaves into an expendable resource, the Llewynians had thrown the Farzian army for a loop.

Evidently, Cain had come to take me somewhere it would be easier to fight. “With how dark it is, your golem would serve as little but a roadblock.”

A person-sized golem might as well have been a drop in the ocean. On the flip side, if I sat atop a colossal titan, it would be hard to make out the people down below in the dark, which could end in me accidentally trampling my own allies underfoot.

“As such, His Highness believes it would be best if you saved your attack for Llewynne’s main body. We’re quite a ways from the front lines here. Why don’t you make a golem for us to ride out on? The farther we are off the ground, the easier it will be to keep you safe.”

“Alright.”

I formed a giant golem. After climbing onto its shoulder alongside Cain, I began marching toward the enemy camp, steering clear of Farzia’s tents so as not to tread on our troops. A nearby wood was ablaze; it looked like Reggie and his men had set fire to the

surrounding area to give them a better look at the enemy. No doubt they were expecting me to put it out for them later.

The entire vicinity of Farzia's campsite had become embroiled in a free-for-all battle.

I spotted a pale frostfox down below. After it had frozen the feet of every enemy soldier—slaves and servicemen alike—our troops moved in to take the immobilized Llewynians out. The slaves on our side were then given their chance to win over their comrades. Anyone who agreed to lay down their weapons was subsequently escorted off the battlefield.

Once that had happened enough times, the Llewynian slaves realized that their companions had aligned themselves with Farzia. That encouraged them to make their own escape, even if it meant risking a stab from behind.

It wasn't long before Llewyrne's human shield strategy was ruined. By the time we entered back into standard warfare, the surroundings were so brightly illuminated by flames that we might as well have been fighting in broad daylight.

Unfortunately, that was when Llewyrne broke out their last resort. Firing off arrow after arrow coated in contract sand, they turned anyone they could into a defective spellcaster, be they enemy or ally. I could see from above that Farzia had pulled their soldiers back, driving the battle into a deadlock.

If I could just land a blow against their main body, Llewyrne would be left with no option but to retreat. Yet my number one target, Lord Patriciél, was nowhere to be found.

All of a sudden, a pillar of fire erupted from a corner of the woods.

"A defective spellcaster?!"

That was my first thought, but it wasn't in the right spot for that. There was no point in dropping one in the middle of a forest, so far removed from the front lines. What's more, the pillar just kept growing taller and taller—almost as though it were someone hoisting a flag.

"Miss Ada?"

I knew of only one person who could wield fire magic by design.

"If that is her, there's a good chance Lord Patriciél is somewhere nearby," Cain posited, and I started moving my golem in that direction.

Perhaps, I thought, there was a motive behind the blaze. For example, what if she was trying to tell us where to attack? From where she was standing, she ought to have been able to spot my golem's silhouette against the starry sky, even in the faint moonlight.

By the time she let the fifth pillar of flame loose, we had arrived

on the scene.

“Miss Ada!”

There, I could see Ada clear as day, shielding herself in a cocoon of her own flames. Llewynian soldiers were throwing their spears in an attempt to strike her down.

If they're regarding her as an enemy, that means...

“You were trying to tell us where the enemy was!”

That certainly explained why she was under attack. She had exposed the very heart of the Llewynian troops.

Before I could move in to help her, however, vines of thorns suddenly sprang up from the earth, winding themselves around the incoming spears and soldiers and rendering them immobile.

The Thorn Princess is helping Ada?!

I hadn't the foggiest idea what was happening, but what mattered right now was crushing the very backbone of Llewyn.

“Hurry up, Kiara!” I could faintly hear Ada shout.

With a nod, I willed my golem to deliver a swift kick to the nearby cavalry unit, sending them flying. From the looks of it, that had indeed been the linchpin of the troops. With those men out of the picture, the remaining knights fell to pieces and scattered every which way.

Later on, we managed to find the corpse of a Llewynian general among the bodies. Unfortunately, it seemed I'd let Lord Patriciél get away. We eventually learned that, under the guise of a divide-and-conquer tactic, he had taken a handful of knights with him and fled to Sestina Castle.

Chapter 4: The Thorn Princess and Her Memories

Sometime later, the battle drew to a close. There were no more enemy soldiers left around Ada. Once I'd made extra sure of that, I hurriedly stretched out my golem's hand toward her.

"This way, Miss Ada! Let's find you a hiding place!"

Although she had just offered us a helping hand, she was still the one responsible for Lord Azure's death. In the distance, I could see Lord Enister mounted upon his giant goat. That meant the area had to be full of Enister soldiers. Given their close relations to the House of Azure, it seemed unlikely that they would let Ada walk free. In a worst-case scenario, they might not even wait for her to give her side of the story.

Ada nearly jumped out of her skin when I called out to her. She then cast a glance over her shoulder. I followed her gaze to where the Thorn Princess stood.

As she strolled over to Ada at a leisurely gait, the silver-haired Thorn Princess said, "Why don't we let her give us a lift? She can lead us to sanctuary, I'm sure."

With a meek nod, Ada climbed onto my golem's palm alongside the Thorn Princess. Once I'd lifted them off the ground and cupped its gigantic hands to keep them hidden, I went on the move. Along the way, I ran into a few Évrard knights hanging close to our base, so I left them a message for Reggie and Alan before heading toward the back of the campsite.

Now that we'd driven the enemy elsewhere, people were less likely to wander over there. I chose that as the spot to set Ada and the Thorn Princess down. I, too, hopped back down to the earth and dismantled my golem.

Perhaps Ada had been meant to participate in the night raid, seeing as she was wearing a black Llewynian cloak over a dark outfit. Her face had gone so stiff that I hesitated to say anything, but there was something I just had to tell her.

"Um, Miss Ada?" I began.

Her shoulders gave a little start. Apparently, the strain in her face was from apprehension.

Now that I knew she wasn't angry, I said the rest of my piece. "Thanks for saving me back in Trisphede."

I'd wanted to thank her ever since it happened. She was the whole reason I'd made it out of there before Lord Credias could have his way with me.

A single tear rolled down Ada's cheek.

"Hey, what happened?! Did I say something wrong? Or did you get hurt?" I rushed over to Ada in a panic, patting down her arms and shoulders for injuries.

Ada stared at the ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I should have asked before touching you!"

Her tone laced with exasperation, the Thorn Princess said, "I thought I told you to be more forthright, Ada. You're hardly a child. Enough with all the sulking, temper tantrums, and crying you do just to test the limits of people's patience."

"I-I know!" Ada replied, flustered at the motherly scolding. She then glanced over at me, hung her head once more, and opened her mouth to speak. "I'm... glad to see you safe."

Once she'd managed to spit out those first couple words, the rest came tumbling out like a dam had burst. "For the longest time, I averted my eyes, avoided doing anything for myself... and convinced myself that everything was *your* fault. I blamed you for my becoming a spellcaster."

From there, Ada went on to explain the truth—that from day one, Llewyn had scoped out her father to partake in the cover-up of their clandestine mining of contract stones. Ada herself had merely been blackmail material toward that end.

Pursing her lips as though she was doing her best to hold herself together, Ada went on, "The original plan was for the queen's vassals to keep me locked up. The Thorn Princess told me that if things had gone that way, I would have died."

From the sound of it, Ada had met the Thorn Princess back at Sestina Castle. When the silver-haired girl had told her of the future meant to unfold, Ada had initially doubted the veracity of what she was saying. She had gone on to confirm it for herself, however.

"Lord Patriciél admitted to me that that was his original plan. After you got away, however, securing the contract stones became more vital to his plan. Ultimately, becoming a spellcaster saved my life."

"Oh, the contract stones..."

As Ada's confession filled in the puzzle piece I'd been missing for so long, I thought to myself, *Now I get it. That's why defective spellcasters never showed up in the RPG.*

In the game version, Lord Patriciél and friends had seized Ada as a hostage, only to let her waste away and die. To no surprise, her father refused to cooperate in that scenario, thus denying Llewyn their

mountain of contract stones.

The mining site had to be somewhere that wouldn't allow them to operate behind closed doors. Since Llewynne's invasion needed to be kept secret, Lord Patriciél would have wanted to avoid any suspicious behavior; thus, they had simply abandoned their hopes of harvesting the stones.

Still, how did the Thorn Princess know so much about that "what-if" scenario?

A wry smile playing at her lips, Ada carried on with her monologue. "After the viscount died... for a while, I didn't know what to do with myself. Back when he was around, I'd always gone along with whatever he said—whether that involved murdering people on the battlefield or even burning Lord Azure to death. I knew there was no place left for me in Farzia. But the Thorn Princess had a different take on the matter."

Her eyes flicked to the silver-haired girl standing beside her. "Now that I'm a spellcaster, she said I ought to be able to live however I please. So long as I remain vigilant, I can take down any bandits or brigands who assail me on my solo travels. I have the power to remove anyone in my path. 'With all that in mind,' she asked me, 'what is it that you most desire?'"

At that, Ada lifted her head. The trepidation that plagued her expression had finally disappeared. "I don't want to die. Still, I have no experience living a commoner's life. My only options would be to starve to death here or go live as a spellcaster in another country. When I said as much, the Thorn Princess claimed she had a plan to let me live as a normal woman, not a spellcaster of Farzia—so long as I followed along and did as she said."

With that trademark wise smile on her face, the Thorn Princess took over the explanation from there. "I came to make you a proposal. If you can promise Ada a safe and secure livelihood, I promise to join Farzia's ranks and fight alongside you. Ada, meanwhile, is to stay out of the war. How does that sound? I believe the assistance she just provided you ought to factor into the negotiations as well."

"Oh, that's clever."

If I were the one in charge, I would have closed the deal then and there. If we would be getting a new spellcaster out of the bargain, there was a good chance the rest of the generals would agree, even if it meant letting Ada walk free.

"That does sound like our best option."

It seemed Reggie had arrived at just the right moment. Judging by the way he had trotted up on his horse and given his immediate approval, he must have overheard a good bit of our conversation. Alan and his royal guard trailed along after him.

“As tempting as the idea of a *third* spellcaster is, it’s probably for the best that Lady Ada doesn’t join our army. Too much internal strife could end up holding our soldiers back. How does that sound to you, Alan?”

“It makes sense enough to me, so I have no objections. This is the best plan we have. How do we go about this, then? Hide her away in some other territory?”

He probably thought it was best to get her out of here ASAP.

Reggie replied, “Yes. Évrard or Delphion. Either one should be willing to work with us on this, I think. Personally, I would suggest Delphion. There will be a handful of people there who know you as an enemy spellcaster, but half of the province’s own populace sided with Llewynne for a time. I would expect them to be more open-minded, considering their circumstances.”

“I doubt Emmeline will take issue with it, either,” Alan agreed with a nod.

That was enough to convince Ada. “Thank you very much. I shall defer to your judgment.”

Now that he had her consent, Reggie handed out his orders.

Before long, Emmeline and a dozen Delphion cavalymen had snuck onto the scene. Lord Enister would need to be informed of the arrangement eventually, but they were probably waiting to tell him until it was already a done deal. Besides, if the Azuran knights caught sight of Ada, they weren’t going to take it lying down. Thus, the plan was to send her away posthaste.

“Lady Ada,” said Reggie. “Though you’ve caused us a good deal of trouble, I am no less grateful for your help. Thank you for rescuing Kiara.”

Ada’s eyes fluttered in surprise, after which a bashful look overtook her features. “I’m honored to hear it, Your Highness.”

I had no way of knowing just how many different emotions were packed into that succinct reply of hers. Either way, the reinvigorated look on her face left a lasting impression on me.

Just as she was hurrying to leave, Ada caught sight of Felix passing by. No doubt she had plenty left to say to him. She asked the rider to bring her horse to a stop, then went to go strike up a conversation.

Of course, the two were destined to go their separate ways. Ada was to disappear into a far-off wood, and Felix was to return to Reggie’s side.

The reason I was so curious about the contents of their discussion was because Emmeline and Gina had mentioned that Ada might be in love with Felix. It wasn’t something I could just *ask* about, though, so I held my tongue.

Luckily for me, Reggie brought it up himself. "You could have looked a little sadder to say goodbye, Felix. You spent quite a bit of time with her, didn't you?"

Felix seemed a bit discomfited by the teasing. "Well, she was quite the handful. I did get an apology, at least."

Oh. Sounds like Ada said sorry for the time she nearly killed him, and Felix accepted her apology.

I was a little sad to hear that they'd ended things on such an inconclusive note. Still, so long as the both of them stayed alive, they might have the chance to one day meet again. The thought made me gladder than ever that the pair of them had lived to see today.

"Thanks, Thorn Princess. I didn't have the chance to bring it up until now, but *you* helped me out in Trisphede, too. By the way... Reggie, do you have the you-know-what with you?"

Reggie knew exactly what I was referring to. "Yes. I've been keeping them on my person."

From the inner pocket of his jacket, Reggie pulled out a cameo engraved with a crest and tied with an old, red ribbon, along with a dingy silver ring that bore no gemstone.

As he held them out for the Thorn Princess, he said, "Shall I call you Efia from now on?"

After staring long and hard at the cameo and ring, the Thorn Princess let out a sigh. "No. That name doesn't truly belong to *me* anymore. Stick with 'Thorn Princess,' if you would. I'd appreciate it if I could have that cameo. As for the ring... you ought to hold on to that," she said, gazing up at Reggie.

That comment sealed it; the ring definitely *had* belonged to Reggie's mother. Since it was all that was left of her, the Thorn Princess must have deemed it proper that her son be the one to keep it.

Alan, who had been watching over this exchange, said to Reggie, "This spellcaster will be joining our troops, correct? We ought to let her rest somewhere with Kiara, then. Once we've taken care of the essentials, you can slip out early. Let's focus on wrapping up what we need to."

We were right on the heels of a battle. Reggie had other things to do. Alan was advising him to handle the most important postwar directives before calling it quits for the day.

"Thanks, Alan. Can I leave these two ladies to you, Wentworth?"

"Certainly, Your Highness."

Opting to follow Alan's suggestion, Reggie left me and the Thorn Princess in Cain's hands, then headed back to where everyone else was gathered to take the reins. Felix and the rest of the knights followed after him.

With Cain to accompany us, I invited the Thorn Princess to my tent toward the back, unscathed despite the assault. She sat beside me atop the tent floor. Though I only had water to offer her, I poured her a cup and handed it over.

“My, thank you very much,” she said as she took it in her hands.

Watching her was starting to give me the jitters. I had so many things I wanted to ask her that I didn’t know where to begin. *How did you get here? How have you kept the same looks for so long? How did you know what was supposed to happen in the future?*

I must have stared at her a little too hard. The Thorn Princess giggled. “You look like you have a lot of questions, Kiara.”

“Err... I do, as a matter of fact.” Honesty was the best policy, I figured.

“Hoho!” came Master Horace’s cackle. “Why don’t you just start firing them off, little disciple?”

Meanwhile, as she finished draining her cup and set it aside, the Thorn Princess cast the doll an unsettled glance. “Pardon me, Kiara.”

“What is it?”

“I have something I’ve wanted to ask *you* for a while now. Why did you put that old man’s soul in such an uncanny doll? Is this your idea of aesthetic?”

“What?! No, you’ve got the wrong idea!”

While I denied it, Master Horace objected to the “uncanny” descriptor. “What a rude little girl you are! I’ve just started learning to love this new body of mine, so don’t you go complaining about it!”

“I’m no ‘little girl.’ I hit my twenties ages ago.”

“When you’re stuck in a body that tiny, you’re a little girl no matter *how* old you are.”

“Considering you’re even smaller than I am, you hardly have room to talk. Besides, I never *asked* to stop aging.”

Master Horace’s tone went from contentious to curious. “What, was it the effects of your magic?”

“More or less. I’m a bit of a special case, you see. I can inherit the abilities of those who have passed on. But seeing as my host’s body is dead, it naturally ceases to age.”

“You inherit... what?” I murmured.

A faint smile played at the Thorn Princess’s lips. “You heard me. Didn’t you ever find it strange that my magic seemed to extend to more than just controlling thorns?”

I *had* wondered about that. If there were only two types of magic to account for—her thorns, plus seeing the future—then it could have made sense. But what about the time she had disappeared in the blink of an eye? Besides, knowing the future would be one thing, but she seemed to know some very personal details about my life.

"I just assumed you could use several different kinds of magic."

"Like what, for example?"

When she asked me to lay out my thought process, I listed a couple of different possibilities. "Controlling thorns and teleporting, for starters. Clairvoyance, too. That wouldn't explain some things, though, so I thought maybe you could see how a person's past could have gone."

The Thorn Princess giggled at my speculation. "Yes. I suppose that's the most logical conclusion."

At that, she cast some sort of spell. When a faint rustling sound reached my ears, I peeked outside the tent, only to find our shelter beset in thorny vines to keep interlopers away. Cain, who had been waiting for us outside, looked more than a little startled.

"Forgive me, dear," the Thorn Princess said. "I don't want anyone else to know what I'm about to tell you yet."

I apologized to Cain. "It sounds like she wants to have a private, spellcasters-only talk. I'm sorry to ask you this, but can you make sure nobody else gets near my tent?"

"Well, if you insist."

I thanked Cain for his understanding, then ducked back inside the tent. When I sat back down in my spot next to the Thorn Princess, she resumed her explanation in more hushed tones than before. "There's something I need to tell you, Kiara. It was my meeting with you that allowed me to change your fate."

"Uh, when did that happen?"

When did we first meet? Was it when I was a little girl?

"The first time I ever came into contact with you was after you had been slain by Alan."

"Huh?!"

"I had learned of your relationship with Reggie from a gravely injured knight. Given that knowledge, I *had* hoped to keep you alive, but I couldn't save you from a wound that fatal. Instead, I used my magic on you, hoping to glean some insight into the queen and her minions from your memories."

"Uh... but...?"

My eyes went wide. After all, death at Alan's hands was part of the story of "the Kiara who never escaped her marriage"—the same story I knew from the RPG.

That vision I'd had of being murdered by Alan played back in my head.

Heedless of my confusion, the Thorn Princess went on, "That was when I learned of the mysterious memories sleeping within you. Memories of another world—one with streets full of gray roads and buildings the likes of which I'd never seen. One with boxes that

displayed all manner of sights.”

She was talking about my memories of my past life. Concrete roads and buildings. Televisions. But what kind of magic would let her peek into those memories?

“What’s more, I saw that you had memories of a story that unfolded almost identically to the battles we had fought thus far—and with them, hidden wishes. Hidden regrets. At the time, however, I didn’t have any desires for you in particular. I found it fascinating that you knew of such wondrous things, but that was the extent of it. But after Alan and the queen ultimately took each other out and I began looping over and over again, failing to rescue Reginald each time, I decided to make an ally of you. I thought that if anyone could save Reginald, it would be you.”

I was dumbfounded. I understood the meaning of what she was saying, obviously. But to actually pull that off, you would need an entirely different type of magic than I had accounted for. It would take some kind of spell to read another person’s memories.

Still, *Reggie* had been the trigger for all this? Why?

“Say, Thorn Princess... Have you met Reggie somewhere before?”

If she truly was Efia, a daughter of the royal family, it would come as no surprise if she was acquainted with Reggie. And yet, he hadn’t seemed to have heard of her before.

For the first time since I’d met her, the Thorn Princess looked ready to cry. “I’m not Efia. I’m the one who was turned into Lord Credias’s test subject—Reginald’s mother.”

For a moment, I forgot to breathe.

She’s Reggie’s mom?! But she has silver hair, and I thought his mom wasn’t a member of the royal family! What’s going on?!

“If you’re Reggie’s mom, does that make you... Queen Linesse? But he told me... you were a brunette...”

“Oh, so he’s spoken to you about me? I’m... glad to hear he hasn’t forgotten about me.” The Thorn Princess chewed her lip. “My magic is the art of possession. I can seize command of any living thing, control them, and read their memories.”

“Possession? Is that how you control your thorns?”

“That’s right. The secret behind my trademark is that thorns are simply the easiest plant to manipulate.”

“Then... Then...” I was so surprised that I was blanking on how to form words. Eventually, I managed to get out what I wanted to ask. “Does that mean you’re possessing Efia’s body?”

The Thorn Princess nodded. “I just barely managed to become a spellcaster. Unfortunately, my body couldn’t hold up under my own magic. As I grew weaker and weaker, Efia offered to let me take over her body in exchange for a shot at revenge.”

That explained why she had Efa's appearance. The unbelievable story behind it had left me at a loss for words.

"I can wield the magic of anyone I possess. Efa had the power to travel back into the past—though she didn't have the flexibility to pick and choose how far back she would go."

"Oh..."

How did the Thorn Princess seem to know everything? How could she know of a past that had never actually come to pass? I finally had the answers to all my questions.

"And so... you went back in time to change fate."

She smiled, satisfied to see me piecing things together.

Chronologically, things had unfolded like so: when the Thorn Princess (a.k.a. Linesse) was about to die, she had taken possession of Efa's body. With that, she had gained access to Efa's magic, in addition to the magic she already possessed.

Later on, while she was living in hiding from Lord Credias, she had heard the bombshell news of Reggie's death. She had turned back time in hopes of saving him, but she could never quite manage to prevent his death. I had to assume there were a lot of events she couldn't get directly involved in, considering Lord Credias was a spellcasting mentor to both her *and* Efa.

Thus, she had chosen to enlist Alan's help to take down the queen and her vassals. But what was all that about Alan and the queen taking each other out? Either way, her point seemed to be that she had decided to use me to stop that from happening.

"Since I had memories of how the war would go, you thought I might have a chance at pulling something off, and that's why you brought me into the picture?"

"I hoped that since you had lived in a different world, you might approach things with a fresh perspective."

She had a point. If it weren't for my past-life memories, I wouldn't be where I was today. No doubt I would have assumed it was pointless to run, instead living out the life I was destined for.

"But how did you do it?"

When did I first come into contact with the Thorn Princess? I don't remember.

"If I wanted to spur you into action, I needed you to recall those memories of your former life. Preferably *before* you became a spellcaster. After all, by that point, you would have already been stripped of your freedom." She stared long and hard at me. "And so, I tracked you down while you were still an infant. If you had those memories from a young age, you were bound to grow up closer in personality to your past self. Thus—and I apologize for doing so—I snuck into your home to cast my spell on you. I must say, I had quite

the time finding your house.”

The Thorn Princess had used her possession magic on me when I was still only two years old, thus unearthing the memories lying dormant within me. *That* was why I’d possessed faint memories of my past life for as long as I could remember.

“Efia herself was only able to make short leaps through time, which is why she could never manage to escape Credias’s clutches. Does the nature of magic depend on the soul, I wonder? *I*, on the other hand, managed to travel back over ten years. Thus, as soon as I’d determined that I was going to change the past, I settled on a starting point. I traveled back to that moment time after time, watched how everything played out, and recorded all the results within that forest.”

After writing everything down—her failures and her near successes, what she planned to try next—she then dove back into the past, saw what progress she had made, and went back to her starting point once more, repeating the process over and over again.

If it were me, I was pretty sure I would have gone insane. Nonetheless, the Thorn Princess continued her process of trial and error without end—all to save her beloved son.

“Although you now remembered your previous life, I had no way of knowing how you would act on that knowledge. I must say, it took me by surprise when you and Reggie wandered into my forest while I was awaiting the results.”

She must have been referring to the time we stopped by the Forest of the Thorn Princess not long after Reggie had first taken me in.

“At first, I didn’t realize who you were. I’d only ever gotten glimpses of you as a scrawny girl with a dark, fatalistic countenance. The version of you that came into my forest had so much hope in your eyes... and what’s more, you’d already managed to meet with Reggie. I just knew you would be sure to save him.”

The Thorn Princess flashed me a smile, and I ducked my head awkwardly. I sure didn’t feel like I’d actually done all that much, and there was no telling if I’d truly managed to save Reggie just yet.

“Just as I had expected, you changed Reggie’s fate with ease. But after surviving the Battle of Évrard, yet another death awaited him. You spared him from his second potential demise, Kiara. Reggie could very well have died from the contract sand when he was shot by that arrow. It was your quick thinking that kept him alive.”

That attempt on his life had made *me* desperate to protect Reggie from whatever came his way, too. I knew then that simply defending him from the Llewynians who had crossed the border wasn’t going to be the end of it. The incident had impressed upon me that as the prince, there was no telling when he could be assassinated.

It sounded like the Thorn Princess, who had been gathering information on me and Reggie, had found out about what had transpired later.

“The third instance was in Trisphede. You were meant to suffer terrible burns after your confrontation with Credias, which kept you from showing up to the next battle. Thus, despite his desperate attempts to rescue you, Reggie couldn’t find you anywhere, and just as he was retreating in the face of Credias’s magic... he lost his life.”

The Thorn Princess had experienced that very future once before.

“So you traveled back into the past again? And the next time around, you rescued me in Trisphede.”

I thought back to the thorns that had shielded me from Ada’s flames.

“That’s right. I had to keep you safe. If I let things play out the way they were supposed to, the Farzian army would have lost. Unfortunately, I couldn’t directly protect you from Credias. That meant I couldn’t stop you from getting captured by Salekhard, either. The best I could do was shield you from the fire.”

The thorns had burned away as soon as they’d finished their job of shielding me from Ada’s flames. That had been to keep Lord Credias from catching on to her magic.

“The fourth time was in Eirlain. King Isaac let you get away, but because no one knew how Credias’s magic worked, Reginald was turned to sand and you were killed. Farzia’s defeat was decided even more quickly than it had been when Credias stayed out of the fray.”

I swallowed hard. “That’s why you went back into the past and made sure Reggie had magic of his own.”

“Right. I had no choice but to try everything I possibly could. When Reggie asked me if he could wield magic, I tried to think up a way to make it possible.”

It all made sense now. We needed to have any and every means available to combat Lord Credias’s magic.

Even then, we’d cut it pretty close. If it hadn’t been Reggie’s left arm that Lord Credias had made a grab for, he would have died.

If things hadn’t gone as well as they did, and Reggie had died again, the Thorn Princess surely would have gone back in time once more. The next time around, she wouldn’t have settled for just teaching him to use magic; she probably would have thought up another trick to try, too.

At that, I recalled a mysterious memory of mine. “Come to think of it, I had a strange vision after the Battle of Eirlain. I saw myself killed by Lord Credias, and Reggie turned to sand soon after. Was that one of your memories of a past that could have been?”

“Most likely. If I had to guess, it was caused by the contract stone

I gave you to become a spellcaster with,” the Thorn Princess said with a nod. “That was a fragment of a stone I’d found in my attempts to escape Credias’s influence. I had thought that perhaps if I swallowed down a second contract stone, it might diminish his power over me. It didn’t yield the result I had hoped for, unfortunately. But now that we had each ingested mana from the same stone, the pasts I had seen with my magic may have been passed along to you as well.”

So that *had* been one of the Thorn Princess’s memories, as well as a glimpse of what was supposed to have happened.

“That’s enough of that talk, I’d say. I don’t want Reggie to overhear us.”

“Really? But...”

If there was anyone who needed to know the Thorn Princess’s true identity, it was Reggie. He had suffered so much; he had looked for his absent mother until he was forced to give up, only to later learn that she had never abandoned him at all. I wanted him to know that she was still alive and well.

The Thorn Princess denied me. “No. He can’t know until the war is over, at the very least. It will just make it that much harder for me to act.”

“Is there something you still need to do?”

Was there a reason the Thorn Princess needed to intervene in the coming battles? Was that why she had joined up with us?

Plus, the Thorn Princess had mentioned something about the queen and Alan taking each other out. How could the queen have managed that when she clearly didn’t know how to fight? Not to mention that I couldn’t imagine Alan going down that easily.

As a sense of dread crept over me, the Thorn Princess gave me a wry smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell you what I need from you. If you do as I say, everything should be fine. Just keep this between the two of us, alright?”

Her thorns must have vanished along with that entreaty of hers, seeing as Cain called out, “Is your discussion over, Miss Kiara?”

“Oh, yes! We’re done.”

“His Highness is here.”

From the sound of it, Reggie was done with his post-battle cleanup.

“I’ll explain everything myself,” the Thorn Princess declared. Once she’d risen to her feet, she murmured, “Promise to keep my secret, okay?” With that, she left the tent.

I followed after her in a hurry. When I stepped outside, I saw Reggie and the Thorn Princess discussing her formal offer to join the war effort. He mentioned that he had gotten the approval of his generals where Ada was concerned, too.

The Thorn Princess nodded, satisfied. For her part, she never mentioned that she was actually the former queen, Linesse, instead telling him that she was a one-of-a-kind spellcaster who could use two types of magic. What's more, she fabricated an explanation for her magic, claiming that she could see glimpses of the future.

Once that was done, Reggie asked her about Queen Linesse. "How did my mother... meet her end?"

"She had the makings of a spellcaster—but sadly, her aptitude was imperfect. Her body failed to hold up under the strain, and she turned to sand." The Thorn Princess gave a succinct answer, still playing the part of Efia.

His expression darkened, but Reggie thanked her nonetheless. "Thank you. I'm just glad to know what happened to her."

Though she gazed at Reggie with pity in her eyes, she never did confess that she and Linesse were one and the same.



There was no follow-up attack the next morning.

I woke up feeling deeply relieved. Not long after that, the Thorn Princess was called away by Reggie. As I nibbled away at my breakfast and soup, I muttered to myself, "Why doesn't she want to tell him?"

If it was what the Thorn Princess wanted, I had no choice but to keep my mouth shut. Still, when I thought back to how Reggie had tormented himself over his mother, I had to wonder why she was so insistent on keeping it mum.

"She's got to have a good reason she can't tell him," suggested Master Horace, who had been listening to my mumblings.

"What kind of reason, though?"

"Could be a kind of foresight on her part. Maybe she thinks that if she keeps her real name under wraps, it'll make it easier for him to treat her like any other spellcaster. Or maybe... she just thought he was more likely to buy the story she gave him than 'I went back into the past.'"

He gave a cackle, then added, "Or maybe it just felt too late to tell him she was his mother. She *was* forced to give him up when he was still a kid. Bet that's weighing on her something heavy."

That would make sense, I thought, nodding my head. The Thorn Princess had worked so hard to save Reggie. She desperately wanted him to live, and no doubt she'd missed him dearly, too. For each time she'd turned back the clock, she'd spent that much longer away from him, so perhaps the idea of revealing her true identity had become too daunting.

"But, y'know... Eeeheehee! I've got to hand it to you, you handled yourself pretty well for your first conversation with your boyfriend's

mother!"

"Oh!"

I finally started to panic. I hadn't thought too hard about the fact that she was Reggie's mom while we were talking. Since the form she took as the Thorn Princess was another girl named Efia, it had been harder to connect the dots in my mind.

"Did you have to point it out, Master Horace? Now I'm going to freeze up the next time I talk to her."

Come to think of it, when the Thorn Princess watched my memories, uh... she probably saw a few glimpses of what I've gotten up to with Reggie, didn't she?

The second the reality of the situation dawned on me, I clutched my head in my hands.

"Heeheehee!"

My plight only drew more and more delighted laughter from Master Horace.



Not an hour later, we received a surprising report: the Llewynian troops had retreated.

Both Alan and Reggie suspected there had to be a catch; however, the Llewynians simply carried on with their solemn procession, leaving Sestina Castle behind to march off toward the royal capital. Eventually, they disappeared into the distance.

We had no choice but to take the castle now. Luckily, that was when the Salekhardian troops finally caught up to us. Wary of Llewyn's next move, Reggie stationed the Salekhardians along the road that led to the royal capital. In the meantime, the Farzian troops laid siege to Sestina Castle.

We were in for an even bigger surprise there: Lord Patriciél had sent a letter stating his intent to surrender. His one condition was a one-on-one meeting with me.

At the subsequent gathering of the generals, I checked in with the Thorn Princess, who was likewise sitting in on the meeting. "Do you think it's safe to go along with this?"

"Absolutely. I know exactly what he's trying to do."

"Have you seen this future, too?" Reggie asked.

The Thorn Princess nodded, impassive. "Yes. Patriciél was plotting to kill Kiara. He assumed she would be the queen's greatest obstacle moving forward."

"But how did he hope to manage that?" Jerome wondered aloud, skepticism in his voice.

"He demanded a dialogue, claiming he wanted to formally cut ties with his daughter. He set up a tent for the two of them, and once he'd

invited her inside, he started talking to keep her distracted. In the meantime, his men sprinkled the powder of a contract stone all over the tent.”

“Hm, I see,” Alan muttered. “That would do a number on Kiara in and of itself, and he’d take the opportunity to have the men he’d brought along with him attack her.”

“Exactly. Though he crumbled away into sand afterward, in his last moments, Patriciél sent the tent up in flames with his fire magic. Nobody inside had time to run. If anyone standing guard outside got too close, they would likewise be turned into defective spellcasters, so they had to keep their distance. Both Kiara and His Highness managed to make it out alive, ultimately, but they took quite a bit of damage in the process. That took its toll on Farzia in the following battle.”

Alan and the generals hummed thoughtfully.

“If we refuse, I’m sure Lord Patriciél will find a way to force our hand,” said Reggie.

Lady Évrard made a face. “I can guess what he might have in mind. I wager that if we turn him down and rush the castle, he’ll respond by turning the people of the castle town into defective spellcasters.”

“I agree, Aunt Beatrice. Furthermore, we should proceed under the assumption that he has enough contract stones on hand to pull it off.”

“In that case, we need to decide now which demands we’re willing to entertain, and which we are not,” declared Alan.

Reggie nodded. “How does this sound for an offer? We can allow him a meeting with our spellcaster, but we get to pick the location ourselves.”

His proposal was swiftly put into action. We sent a messenger to deliver our answer to Lord Patriciél posthaste. It wasn’t long before we received his reply: *I agree to your terms. That said, I request that each party have no more than five witnesses present.*

We assumed that the “five witnesses” rule meant he had some other scheme up his sleeve, but seeing as there was a limit on what the count could do, we accepted the condition regardless.

Now that we had ourselves a deal, we had to set up a place to meet. I crafted the pillars of the tent out of stone, then draped a cloth over the top half only, effectively eliminating the walls. Archers were stationed in the distance, carefully positioned so they weren’t standing downwind. These were all steps taken to prevent him from sprinkling the contract powder around, of course.

Cain and Lady Évrard would be sitting in with me. Felix, Reggie, and the Thorn Princess would be waiting outside the tent.

Originally, Jerome was supposed to be the one accompanying me;

however, Lady Évrard had made the case for her own attendance, asserting that having a member of the royal family present would serve to lower Lord Patriciél's guard.

"There's no need to put yourself in such danger, Lady Évrard." Once we had gathered under my newly constructed tent, I tried my hand at dissuading her one last time. "Please rethink this. I'll never make it up to Alan if he loses his mother."

Lady Évrard gave an amused chuckle. "You're the one in the most danger here, Kiara. Nonetheless, since he asked for you by name, we can't very well keep you away. Besides, if something were to happen to *you*, how would *I* ever make it up to Reginald?"

"Erm..."

"I've never done much for him otherwise." Lady Évrard hung her head, forlorn. "I wanted to help his mother, but I never managed to reach her. I still regret that I couldn't do anything to stop what happened to her. That's all the more reason for me to ensure he doesn't lose what's precious to him ever again."

My gaze flicked over to the Thorn Princess beside me. Her hood was pulled low over her head to keep her hair hidden. I had to wonder what was running through her mind.

Just as my shoulders drooped, Cain gave me a clap on the back. "Just focus on your meeting with Lord Patriciél, Miss Kiara."

I nodded and turned my gaze forward. It was right then that Lord Patriciél came into view, heading our way from the city of Sestina, which could be seen in the distance.

Looking as stern as ever, Lord Patriciél dismounted his horse and walked over, the five knights he had brought along following behind him. None of the five men were carrying weapons. No doubt they had some other trick up their sleeve, though. We had to be careful.

Upon entering the tent, the first thing he did was greet Lady Évrard. "How do you do, Your Highness? I assume you're playing the part of Kiara's guardian for the day. Still, how strange that the leader of your army has declined a seat at the table to negotiate our surrender. I didn't think him the type to hide behind his own aunt." Even under the current circumstances, Lord Patriciél couldn't resist taking a shot at Reggie.

Lady Évrard laughed. "You asked to meet with our spellcaster as part of your terms, not for the negotiations themselves. There's no need for His Highness to make an appearance."

Lord Patriciél gave a derisive snort. "I simply couldn't go without getting in a complaint or two. And I know that once we've acknowledged our defeat, I'll be thrown in a prison cell and deprived of the opportunity to ever see her again." He then turned his gaze on me. "What an ungrateful wretch you are. I'll have you know that if I

hadn't taken you in, your stepmother would have killed you."

From there, he began to recount the hidden circumstances behind his adoption of me—for instance, what would have happened if I'd continued to live in my parents' home. He complained about how much money he'd had to offer for me, and how greedy my stepmother had been. He explained how, some time afterward, my stepmother's house had fallen to ruin.

And yet... nothing he said came as a terrible shock to me. All of those things had stopped mattering to me a long time ago.

Once he had finished his narration, he said without so much as a smile, "It's not too late. The time has come for you to face judgment."

He had delivered it like it was simply the natural continuation of his monologue, and I was so engrossed in what he was saying that I failed to notice what was happening behind him.

I had no idea which line had been their cue. All I knew was that the figures of all five knights—who had looked miserable from the moment they first showed up—were undergoing a rapid transformation. Hard rocks broke through their armor. Barbs of stone burst from their bodies.

"Defective spellcasters?"

According to the future the Thorn Princess had foretold, only Lord Patriciél had become a spellcaster. Why had he transformed the rest of his knights into defectives this time?

While my head swam with questions, Cain tucked me under his arm and put some distance between us and the tent. Lady Évrard evacuated alongside us, and eventually we all came to a stop.

"Miss Kiara!"

"I know. We're just lucky he couldn't sprinkle it everywhere! Now, let's do this!"

If we were up against defective spellcasters, that was all the more reason I had to fight. I placed both hands to the ground, planning to dig a deep hole right in the middle of the tent.

"Hm?"

My magic didn't seem to be working. Was it because they were fellow earth spellcasters?

With a little more elbow grease this time, I erected a wall to block the stony barbs winding from their bodies as they rushed toward us. For the finishing touch, I conjured up razor-sharp spikes of my own, impaling them clean through. Perhaps they had lost the ability to feel pain; the defectives silently dissolved into sand, not a single scream escaping their lips.

Meanwhile, Lord Patriciél looked on with an ominous chuckle. "Aha. I can work with this."

I didn't understand what he meant by that, nor how he could

laugh after he'd just watched me murder his men.

"Stay back, Your Highness! You too, milady!" Felix shouted, ushering Reggie and Lady Évrard farther away. The Thorn Princess was the only one left behind.

I considered how best to slay Lord Patriciél. Before I could take action, however, his right arm burst into flame. The fire snaked forward, burning its way through my stone wall.

Cain pushed me out of the way of the blaze, so I wasn't hurt... but something wasn't right here. Why did Lord Patriciél look so self-possessed as he wielded his flames?

Either way, this wasn't looking good. I launched my attack on Lord Patriciél. I attempted to run him through with a stone spike, just like I had against the defective spellcasters—but before it could reach him, it crumbled away to nothing.

The corners of Lord Patriciél's mouth curved up in a grin. In the next moment, the flames winding from his arm shot toward me once more.

Cain grabbed me and ducked out of the way yet again. As I tried to figure out how this could be happening, I cast another glance over at Lord Patriciél... and that was when the Thorn Princess sprang into action.

"You really *are* the queen's lapdog. How ridiculous."

When the Thorn Princess stepped forward with a laugh, thorny vines sprang up from the ground under Lord Patriciél's feet.

"So you had a second spellcaster, hm? Too bad! It will take more than that to stop me!"

Lord Patriciél clearly tried to do *something*. Nevertheless, the vines didn't give in the slightest, coiling themselves up the length of the count and gradually constricting their grip.

"What is this?"

Lord Patriciél writhed and moaned, shooting flames through the few gaps in the vines in his attempts to burn the thorns away. Each time they withered away, however, a second or third vine burst forth to twine around him, until he had been wrapped up from head to toe. It looked almost as though he'd been sucked into a cocoon of green.

The Thorn Princess took another step toward him, then threw back her hood. Needless to say, the man recognized her face.

"You're... Efia?" he murmured in disbelief.

It seemed the Thorn Princess, on the other hand, hadn't expected him to remember her right away. "My, now this is a surprise. You haven't forgotten me?"

"How? How... haven't you aged a day?"

No doubt it came as all the more of a shock because he *did* recognize her. His daughter, Efia, was standing before him looking no

different than she had so many years ago.

“Oh, you silly man. This is what happens when you force a young, sweet girl like me to become a spellcaster—or don’t you remember that? But really now, I’m amazed you didn’t stop at sacrificing your own flesh and blood in your quest to reclaim your house’s former glory; why, you even offered up your *adoptive* daughter, all for your precious Llewynian princess. Not only that, but you toiled to ensure that the viscount of Credias would serve the queen, not the king. What a shame things turned out this way for you!” The Thorn Princess gave a trill of a laugh.

Though she wore Efia’s form, her mind was that of the former queen, Linessé. Throughout her gleeful heckling, she tightened her grip on the count.

“Finally. Not even this was allowed to me back then. And if it hadn’t been for that pesky viscount, it would have been so easy to kill you, too.”

The Thorn Princess let her grievances fly—Efia’s and Linessé’s both. Based on what she was saying, it was indeed the viscount’s presence that had kept her from going near him for so long.

“So it is you, Efia. But how could this be? Your power only allowed you to travel a mere few days into the past—ngh!”

“My, I do love hearing you croak like a frog. You’re hardly worth keeping as a pet, however. It’s high time you were exterminated.”

The Thorn Princess wound her thorns ever more tightly.

“You... little...” Lord Patriciél cast a baleful glare toward the Thorn Princess—and me. “All I wanted was to grant her her second wish. If it weren’t for you and the prince, I...!”

I heard the crunch of the vines constricting.

“Oh, Mari... May your wish... come true.”

Having spent his final moments calling out Marianne’s name, Lord Patriciél breathed his last. His words broke off, and in the next moment, he crumbled away into sand.

From his dusty remains crawled a single gray lizard. With a whoosh, it sprouted long barbs from its body, flinging itself at the Thorn Princess. She maneuvered her thorns to catch it midair and crush it in her hold.

Yet the lizard refused to die.

“Oh my. A small one though it is, this is a monster. Earth is its element, I assume.”

“Huh?”

“It’s too dense for me to kill. Someone come strike it down with a sword.”

At the Thorn Princess’s request, Cain ran the lizard straight through, only for the reptile to dissolve into sand. It really had been a

monster, after all.

“Why did he have a monster with him?”

I found it curious, but no one had an answer for me. Now that their work was done, the thorns unraveled themselves and retreated back under the earth.

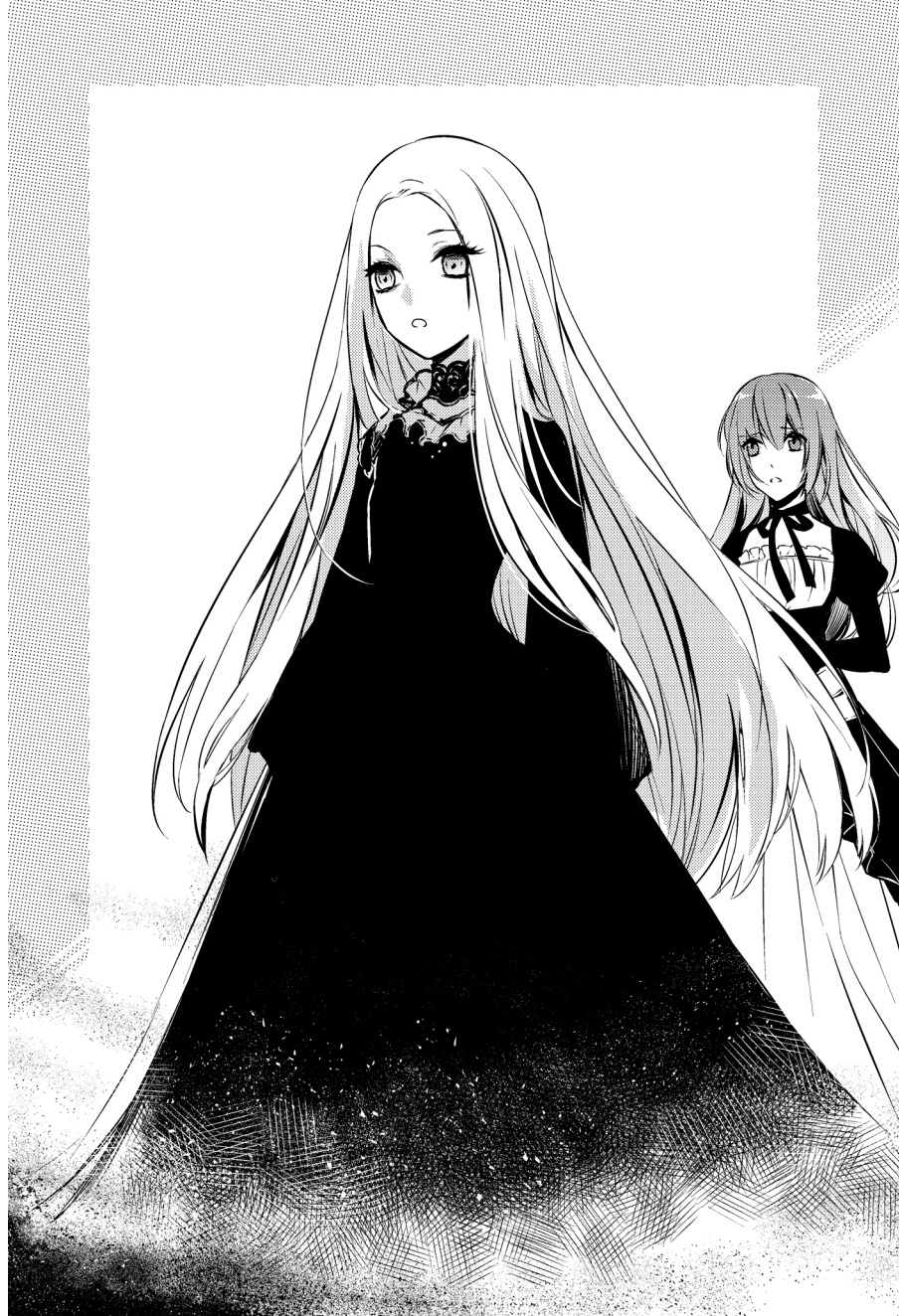
“To think even his last words were devoted to a queen decades his junior,” the Thorn Princess muttered, gazing out at the small lump of sand that had once been Lord Patriciél. “She must be turning in her grave.”

I figured “she” referred to the original owner of her body. No doubt her own father’s willingness to turn her into a guinea pig had thrown Efia into despair, eventually robbing her of the very will to live.

Though she had just taken her revenge, the Thorn Princess didn’t seem pacified. After crushing the mound of sand underfoot one last time for good measure, she left it behind.

“And that’s the end of the count. Let’s go, Kiara. The two of us have a lot to talk about.”

Beckoning me along as though nothing had just happened, she began walking over to where Reggie and his knights were gathered.



Chapter 5: To the Royal Capital

We had slain Lord Patriciél. Our soldiers cheered when they heard the news, and with a new air of harmony about our ranks, I built a tent in my designated spot and went on break.

Some of our men had run to the Sestina castle town to buy the supplies we needed. Why weren't we just staying in the town proper, you might ask? Simple. The plan was currently to leave Sestina in Lady Évrard's hands and march on the capital without a moment's delay. Reggie wanted to afford the queen as little time to prepare as possible.

I'd heard that the slaves from the Kingdom of Toldi, who had defected to our side the other day, were to stay in Sestina for the time being. We would send them home once we had defeated the queen.

Since Lady Évrard would be too busy managing the territory to see us off, she came to say her goodbyes to me before we left.

"Be careful, dear. Something about Lord Patriciél's tactics didn't sit right with me, and I doubt the queen is just standing by doing nothing."

Clad in her menswear and looking as dignified as ever, Lady Évrard wrapped me up in a tight hug that lasted several seconds.

"I will, Lady Évrard. I have my own misgivings, of course... but I don't really know what it all could mean."

We had successfully taken down Lord Patriciél, sure, but something had seemed off about the fight itself. Even assuming he'd made each of his knights swallow a fragment of a contract stone, it was weird that they had all manifested the same element. Lord Patriciél's had been fire, besides. Plus, what was up with the monster?

I had discussed things with the Thorn Princess, and the two of us had speculated that he'd found a way to manipulate the power of the contract stone. We had no idea how he'd managed it, though.

Worse yet, we had no way to verify any of that. We weren't about to resort to human experimentation, after all.

"I promise I'll figure something out! I'll be sure to keep Alan and Reggie safe!" I declared, doing my best to make sure she didn't worry.

Lady Évrard smiled. "Yes, I know I can depend on you. Now that we've found ourselves in circumstances that call for a spellcaster, their swordsmanship won't be enough to see us through. But look out for yourself, too. There's no telling what might happen."

With that, she turned to the Thorn Princess. “Efia... Ah, though as I recall, you prefer not to go by that name. I realize you’ve been through quite a lot. As a member of the royal family, I must apologize for my ignorance of your plight. Once this war has come to an end, tell me if there’s any way I can help you. I’ll do whatever I can.”

She pulled the Thorn Princess into a hug, then exited the tent.

“She never changes. Always so earnest, that one.”

Now that we were alone together, the Thorn Princess gave a dry laugh. The two *had* been relatives and all. Seeing her again must have brought back memories. *I don’t see any reason why she couldn’t tell Lady Évrard the truth, at the very least.*

The Thorn Princess rose to her feet. “I’ll be off now, too. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Do you have business to take care of?”

“No. When Beatrice left, I spotted Reggie heading this way. I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel.”

“A what now?!” I was flustered to hear that from Reggie’s mom, of all people.

The Thorn Princess, meanwhile, just giggled. “I wouldn’t be so gauche as to meddle in the love affair of two children. Besides, considering you always end up together no matter how you first meet, there’s not much point in saying anything, is there? Take care of him for me.”

With a wave of her hand, the Thorn Princess left.

Let me get this straight. Did my boyfriend’s mother just give us her blessing? I’m glad, but talk about awkward!

And lo, just as she had predicted, Reggie showed up moments later.

“Did something happen? You look rather out of it.”

“Oh, uh, the Thorn Princess was just ribbing me about us.” I had no choice but to dance around the issue. Obviously, I couldn’t tell him that the teasing had come from his own mother.

“I was hoping you’d gotten over that sort of thing by now. Does it still embarrass you? I think even the lowest ranking soldiers have heard the news by now.”

“I-I know...”

Reggie smiled and sat down next to me. Lately, he had made a habit of coming to see me. Though he always brought Groul or one of his other guards along with him, he had started asking them to wait outside the tent.

Telling Lady Évrard about our relationship had been the trigger. After that, he’d stopped making any effort to hide it from the people around us, progressively growing more and more bold about it. Naturally, anyone who walked by my tent would be able to tell that

the prince and the spellcaster were alone together.

It was through gestures like this that even those we weren't particularly close to had come to learn about our relationship, I was pretty sure. I doubted Reggie would have let it happen if it weren't his intention.

I was slowly but surely getting used to the idea of those around us knowing what was up. Still, Reggie was never able to hang around for *too* long. To make up for lost time, he always asked me to dote on him while we were together.

Lately, his favorite way to be pampered was with a lap pillow. He'd been pestering me to try it for ages, claiming he wanted to do something traditionally romantic. Frankly, even with a few layers of clothes between us, feeling Reggie's cheek against my thighs always made me want to squirm.

Perhaps we'd done it so many times by now that I'd gotten used to it, though. Today, I was struck with the urge to stroke Reggie's hair while he was lying on my lap. Brushing my hand over his silky locks gave me the strangest feeling—almost like I was really lulling a child to sleep.

After we'd stayed like that for a while, Reggie murmured, "Once we've taken back the royal capital, will you let me stay in your lap even longer?"

"Sure. You don't have to ask my permission for every little thing, you know," I said with a laugh.

Reggie chuckled in return. "Then you won't get mad if I try something a little more extreme?"

"Extreme"?! Even with my past-life sex ed to guide me, I can't imagine what comes next after a lap pillow!

"Like what, for example?"

"Other romantic things."

He kept his wording vague. Still, we *were* a couple. Just having him by my side was enough to make *me* happy, but I didn't want to deny him what he wanted, either.

"Okay, I won't," I conceded with a nod.

"I'm glad to hear it," Reggie replied, delighted, before placing a kiss on my knee and pulling himself upright.

"Hey—!"

Excuse me! That was a surprise attack! In contrast to my surprise, Reggie just smiled his usual, relaxed smile.

"A lap pillow isn't enough to faze you anymore, and I like seeing you flustered every now and then. I'm allowed that much, aren't I?"

When he put it like that, it was hard to protest. It wasn't like I was really angry with him, anyway.

You can have this round, I thought, taking it in stride—and

wondering to myself if, sooner or later, everything Reggie and I did together would just feel natural to me.



We set out the next day. I spent the trip jostled around inside a carriage like always, flanked by warhorses and foot soldiers as we made our way down the road.

Two days later, Lord Enister's troops, who had been at the head of our march and were staying near a town freed from its Llewynian occupiers, were faced with an unexpected development. A messenger came to them with a letter from the royal capital.

The envoy was a Farzian, but his cape was black. Clearly scared out of his wits, he assured them that he was going to quit being a soldier and return to his hometown. Then, insisting that no reply was necessary, he tried to make a break for it.

Lord Enister's giant goat menaced the horse the man had rode in on. Frightened, the steed bucked its rider, after which the goat chomped down on the scruff of his neck and dragged him away.

I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for the guy when I heard the story. Even worse if he'd been serious about quitting his job.

The soldier threw down his sword to prove he had no intention to fight, and once his belongings had been inspected, he was set free. The real issue, however, was the contents of the letter he'd delivered.

"Did the queen really send this?" Reggie asked.

Lord Enister, the one who had presented him with the letter, gave a nod. Seeing as the letter had come from the queen herself, the situation had called for an impromptu war council, and we were currently gathered together inside the same tent.

"That is correct, Your Highness. I read it over before presenting it to you. Seeing as it requires an immediate response, I hoped to hear your verdict straightaway."

Reggie skimmed over the letter. He promptly passed it over to Alan, then announced, "The queen has set a date a week from now. If we don't make it to the royal capital by then, she's going to massacre everyone in the city."

"Massacre them?!" I couldn't help but shout. I wasn't the only one.

Unsettled, Emmeline asked, "Is that even possible? A fair number of the populace already escaped, yes, but there's still a sizable number of townspeople left."

"It's definitely possible," Reggie replied. "She doesn't have to kill them one by one. All she has to do is scatter the powder of the spellcaster-birthing stones. The moment the people inhale it, they'll turn into defective spellcasters and die."

“Exactly,” Jerome agreed, a groan escaping his mouth.

Contract sand was dangerous. That said, if enough time passed after it was sprinkled around, mingling with the stones, soil, and water around it would dilute the mana in the powder, eventually rendering it harmless. Even the powder Lord Patriciél had plastered onto his arrows the other day had lost its efficacy after just a few hours.

When we had gone hunting for the scattered powder to make sure no one got hurt, Reynard had made the mistake of licking an arrowhead. His body hadn’t grown any bigger, which was what had tipped us off to this fact. *But c’mon, Reynard, be more careful about what you put in your mouth!*

I had checked it out for myself, and I hadn’t felt any magic on it either. What’s more, there was a soldier who had been grazed by one of the powder-painted arrows, yet he had walked away from it just fine.

Heck, there was even a soldier who had experimented on himself, thinking the sand might turn him into a real spellcaster. One day after the battle had ended, he had tried using some sand that had spilled out of a bottle left lying around, but nothing had happened.

I had to wonder if it would still degrade regardless of how it was stored. It sounded like this sort of thing didn’t happen with the regular stones, after all.

Nevertheless, within a few hours of sprinkling the powder around, the royal capital was bound to turn into a bloodbath.

“Even if a handful of people *do* have the aptitude to become a spellcaster, we know they’ll be down for the count for three days. Considering everyone else around them will have turned into a defective, they’ll get picked off before they can hope to run,” Alan theorized. Reggie nodded in agreement.

Lord Enister said, “This calls for accelerating our march, lads. We still have a week’s journey ahead of us. At our current speed, there’s a good chance we won’t make it in time.”

“Probably. And given that she’s set a deadline, we can assume she’ll set obstacles in our path to slow us down.”

I tried to work out what everyone was saying. In other words, the queen had set a time limit for us, but she was going to ensure we didn’t make it in time, all so she could force us to watch her slaughter the royal capital?

“Why would she do that?”

“I thought she was more liable to run away, honestly,” Alan remarked.

That comment hit me like a truck.

She should be running away.

Lord Patriciél had withdrawn somewhere around 10,000 soldiers. Even pooling those together with the soldiers stationed in the royal capital, their numbers would only barely reach 20,000. By now, however, the only other territory Llewyrne still occupied was the royal domain, located on the outskirts of the capital. Now that the writing of their defeat was on the wall, more and more Llewyrnian soldiers had to be deserting, too. She didn't have the means to force *all* of her soldiers to stay. The Llewyrnian army's numbers ought to have been lower than ever.

With those paltry numbers, there was no way they were going to win against the Farzian army, which had a spellcaster in its ranks. Given that she had no chance of victory, it only made sense for the queen to flee. She *was* a former princess of Llewyrne, after all.

Yet she hadn't run. Not now, and not in the RPG.

I knew it wouldn't make sense for the final boss of a game to run away, so I had never questioned it that hard. When I thought about it in the context of reality, however, it didn't make any sense.

Then the Thorn Princess opened her mouth to speak. "There must be a good reason behind this. Perhaps she wants to deliver as big a blow to Farzia as she can for the sake of her homeland."

"Interesting thought," Jerome said. "Or perhaps she hopes to ensure that Farzia can't retaliate against Llewyrne right away? It's certainly true that as long as we have the resources to do so, we plan to transition straight into overthrowing the Llewyrnian monarchy."

Reggie nodded.

"One thing we have to consider is that the queen has the power to fight her own battles," the Thorn Princess weighed in. "In the future I saw, she had tamed a monster of her own. It managed to deal the Farzian army quite the heavy blow."

"The queen keeps a monster?" Alan asked, pulling a face. "That complicates things."

"It's just as you fear; Farzia suffered a great deal of damage in the attack. Though it was only the one monster, it was powerful enough to rival an entire army. Seeing as Farzia didn't know of the beast ahead of time, they ended up losing one-third of their troops. When I last peeked into the future, she wasn't utilizing defective spellcasters, so I can't predict exactly what might happen this time around."

"One-third? That smarts."

Everyone's faces twisted into frowns.

"This is my suggestion: shortly before the rest of our troops arrive at the royal capital, the spellcaster and the prince should head into the city first, infiltrate the castle, and kill the queen straight off."

"Kill the queen straight off?" Reggie parroted back.

"That's right," the Thorn Princess replied with a nod. "If you duel

the queen first, her monster won't have a chance to assail your troops. The queen will call on it to protect herself, giving us the opportunity to take it down ourselves. That way, those left in the royal capital won't have to die. Isn't that right?"

"That said," she went on, "I'd advise against rushing to the capital in a smaller unit. Just as the prince predicted, Llewynian soldiers are bound to turn up to impede our march. Needless to say, they'll be keeping an eye out, counting on us sending a squad to assassinate the queen. It would be difficult to slip past without their noticing, and you'll be in trouble if they get you surrounded."

"Yes. Everything waits until we've closed in on the capital," Alan concurred, heaving a sigh.

Reggie was of the same mind. "I agree. At any rate, we need to get moving; time is of the essence. Someone inform Salekhard of the plan."



We made a dash for the royal capital first thing in the morning.

Reggie had informed the troops that if we didn't hurry fast enough, there was going to be a massacre. To no surprise, that got our soldiers to hustle. As a result, we made it into the royal domain in just two days, well ahead of schedule.

There, however, we found Llewynian soldiers blocking the path forward. I walked a little ways ahead of our troops with Reggie and his knights, overlooking the enemy from atop a high cliff. There weren't that many of them, all told. Taking out all 10,000 of them wouldn't have posed too much of a problem, but we didn't want to grind our march to a halt, either.

"There are too many of them to just cut past and let someone else handle the fight," Alan mumbled.

"The troops left behind would be decimated," Reggie agreed. "That said, if all of us tried to slip through together, the damage to our supply wagons would be devastating. Even if Kiara were to summon a golem to aid us, we'd risk being split up, too."

"I'm sure the enemy came here prepared to lay down their lives. With all the soldiers who have fled, the ones who remain are likely convinced they have no choice but to see this through to the end."

"A result of Llewyn attempting to stop the flow of deserters by threatening to turn them into defective spellcasters, perhaps. In which case, we should be prepared to see more defectives enter the fray."

Alan and Reggie brainstormed plans together. Once they came to a consensus, they would go confer with the rest of the generals. That was the way they always did things.

For my part, I wouldn't have minded mowing the enemies down

with my golem and breezing past, but some of our men and their horses could have been left behind in the process. Whichever squad went ahead first might have ended up cut off from the pack and in a lot more danger for it, too.

“If only there were a bridge or something,” I muttered before clapping my hands together in a eureka moment.

We were still a good distance from the royal capital, so I doubted the boss monster would be rearing its head any time soon. That meant it was safe for me to push my magic to its limits—which gave me an idea.

“Say, Reggie. Do you think I could mow down a path with my golem?”

“Take out the soldiers with your magic, you mean?”

“Yeah. But once that’s done, I’ll build earthen walls along the sides of the path my golem carves out. If we have our own ramparts, our infantry and supply convoy can forge ahead swiftly and safely. I’ll pare down the enemy troops while everyone is moving through.”

Reggie looked concerned. “That’s a pretty big area to cover. Will you be alright?”

“I think I can scrounge up enough mana. Besides, we don’t have to worry about a certain monster popping up all the way out here. Right, Thorn Princess?”

With the ball tossed in her court, the Thorn Princess smiled and replied, “The queen’s monster can’t stray too far from her side, so we should be fine. Either way, I have high hopes for any future you forge. Do as you see fit.”

She then gave me a pat on the back. Something about the gesture felt oddly similar to when my mother used to stroke my hair.

“Thank you,” I said, then turned my attention to Master Horace. “Alrighty. I’m going to craft you another custom-made golem. Do you mind being the pilot again?”

“Fine by me. Sounds more fun than swinging from your waist doing nothing, at least. Heeheehee!”

I thanked Master Horace for his compliance, then started getting things ready.

“If I want to erect a wall, I’ll have to sprinkle copper ore over the ground,” I muttered to myself. “Maybe I should have Master Horace do that for me.”

As the Farzian troops kept marching forward, we eventually closed in on the Llewynians, who had stationed themselves all along the high road and surrounding fields. We positioned our supply carriages in the center of our ranks, bolstering the vanguard and rearguard with more soldiers. Isaac and his Salekhardian troops trailed along at the very back of the lines.

Once we were in formation, Cain saw someone give the signal and told me, “Go ahead, Miss Kiara.”

“Got it!”

I moved off to the right flank of the troops, where I created a golem with Master Horace fixed atop its head. I built it a little wider than usual, knowing that extra girth would be vital to this particular strategy.

“The carriages and foot soldiers will still need to get past him, so that should do it. Go on, Master Horace! Do your thing!”

“Eeeheehee!”

Cackling, Master Horace plunged straight into the enemy lines, skewing a little closer to the center of the pack from the right-hand side—all so that he could break open the gate of men packed across the high road.

Most of the enemy soldiers managed to make a run for it, but a good number of them were still sent flying. It probably didn’t help that I had rushed Master Horace into action since speed was of the essence here.

As he cut through Llewynian lines, Master Horace sprinkled copper ore all around, just like we’d planned. I followed after him on Cain’s horse. While the two of us galloped ahead, I built walls about twice the height of a person along either side of the road, shutting the Llewynians out.

“Onward!”

Then, the Farzian troops went on the move. Charging down the high road as it was walled in, piece by piece, the knights at the vanguard mowed down whichever Llewynian soldiers hadn’t managed to get out in time.

The Llewynians clearly hadn’t anticipated that *this* was how we would try to break through. Panicked, they sent soldiers to block the front and back exits of the newly walled road—only for those men to be greeted by Master Horace, who kicked them away like pebbles on the side of the road.

The Thorn Princess backed me up, too. She took control of some nearby vines to stop the soldiers in their tracks, occasionally even tossing them out of the way.

Once the Salekhardians had slipped inside the walled area, I sealed off the back entrance.

Rather than attempting to tear down the wall, the Llewynians simply let their arrows fly. They managed to hit a good handful of our men. If nothing else, however, the rampart meant that having our soldiers hold up their shields was all it took to cut down on casualties.

As we rushed toward the exit, Llewynians started to gather on that end of the tunnel. Hoping to leave their forces as disoriented as

possible, Master Horace stomped straight through the center of the enemy ranks to take them down.

To give us one extra push, I manipulated the soil around some nearby Llewynian soldiers, grabbing them by the ankles. Once it was clear they were trapped, a squad rushed out from within the walled path to strike them down.

There was no time to sit back and watch as the enemy soldiers were picked off.

“How many enemies do you think are left, Sir Cain?”

“Around eight thousand, probably. If Sir Horace keeps it up, I imagine we could bring that number down to seven thousand.”

We hadn’t trimmed their numbers nearly enough. If we left too many of them alive as we forged ahead, the Llewynians were bound to give chase. Too much fighting would bring our march to a standstill.

“Defective spellcasters!” came a shout.

I turned to look, only to spot a gale kicking up near the front lines. The defective spellcasters were clearly wielding wind magic.

“It’s hard to see it from here, and even harder to do much about it,” remarked Cain.

I was starting to feel a little drained now, but nonetheless, I crafted a second golem so I could take a better look at what was happening in the distance. After I’d hopped onto its shoulder and gotten a better view, I went straight to work flattening those men one after the other.

There had been five of them in total, and I didn’t get the sense that their numbers would be multiplying any time soon. Thus, I chose to focus on how to whittle down the enemy troops even further.

Master Horace was heading back toward us, kicking around as many enemies as he could along the way. Just as I was about to join him in his rampage, I heard Reggie call out to me. “Come here, Kiara!”

I immediately knew what he wanted to do.

“We ought to make use of His Highness’s power,” said Cain. “That should take some of the burden off of you.”

Opting to take his advice, I returned to the center of the Farzian troops, hopped down from my golem, and rushed over to Reggie’s side.

“It’s up to you, Reggie!”

When I reached out and touched his shoulder, Reggie raised his sword up high. His target was the dead center of the enemy troops. There weren’t any of our men mixed in there, so he wouldn’t have to worry about friendly fire.

Reggie let his lightning fly. The bolt crashed down from the heavens, sending ripples through the air and tremors through the

ground. Even braced for it, I couldn't help giving a start.

Now that Master Horace had made it back to the rest of us, he lifted one of our knights in the palm of his hand and let him survey the current state of the battlefield. According to him, we had brought the enemy's numbers down to around 5,000.

"By this point, their losses should be getting too heavy for them to give chase," posited Groul.

The entirety of the Farzian army had made it through the walled path now. Reggie gave a nod of agreement at his knight's assessment, then trailed after the rear guard, away from the battlefield.

Unfortunately, some Llewynians refused to give up. A total of about 2,000 enemy soldiers—infantry and cavalry alike—followed in hot pursuit.

Isaac, who was part of the rear guard, had a proposal for us. "You lot are in a hurry, no? Once they've caught up to us a little farther down the road, my men can deal with them. With those numbers, we should have no problem handling them on our own. Go ahead and take the lead, prince of Farzia," he said, spurring his horse onward.

Reggie nodded. "I'll leave them to you, then. Once you've dealt with them, come catch up to us. Chase them too far and you might end up paying for it, so do be careful."

"I won't go after them *that* hard. If I don't watch myself, I might need a certain someone to heal my wounds again. The last thing we need is for you to end up bedridden."

I had more mana left in the tank than I'd honestly expected, so I figured I was still good to help him out.

I started to say, "I mean, if you need it—"

"Now, now, don't push your luck," Isaac said, cutting me off. "I'll see you later." With a laugh and a wave of his hand, he galloped off toward the rear.

Gradually, the Salekhardian troops slowed the pace of their march. Once they had engaged the enemy, the rest of us took the opportunity to make our way down the high road—until eventually, the Llewynian troops disappeared from sight.



That night, we halted our march at a point even farther down the road than we had planned. Plains stretched and rolled across the valley of the Leun River, which ran alongside the royal capital. We camped out in a corner of said meadow.

Given how hard we'd rushed to get here, the Salekhardians had yet to catch up to us. They had informed us via messenger bird that they had made it out alright, but due to the moderate number of casualties sustained, they had been forced to slow the speed of their

march.

The area around the royal capital was Llewynian territory in all but name; we had to stay vigilant of our surroundings. Though Jerome's men were stuck on patrol, they were still allowed to rest in shifts, which left everyone looking a little more bright-eyed.

We had gained one new advantage, too: reinforcements.

We had received a report that two territories upstream of the Leun River, along with the remnants of the Farzian royal army who had fled there, would be coming down the river to launch an attack of their own. From the sound of it, troops were marching to the west of the royal capital from the northwestern territories of Hunavall and Lounès, too.

When we gathered for a meeting upon hearing the news, Lord Enister gave a derisive snort. He wasn't impressed that it had taken the northwestern territories so long to make their move.

"Now there's a slow start for you."

Jerome tried to pacify him. "Now, now. If you consider that all the bordering territories were aligned with Llewynne, it makes sense that they wouldn't want to risk a concentrated attack. We should consider ourselves lucky they chose to enter the fray at all."

That didn't seem to sit much better with Lord Enister. Still, perhaps he had to acknowledge that some support was better than none; he didn't say anything more on the matter.

Alan, who was leading the discussion, continued, "Based on the reports of our reconnaissance unit, there are about twenty-five thousand men stationed near the bridge over the Luen River that leads to the royal capital. The breakdown is around ten thousand Llewynian soldiers, plus fifteen thousand soldiers from the Farzian nobility still backing the queen."

"There isn't much of a gap in our numbers," said Reggie. "With the backup coming from the north and the west, the Llewynian troops will be left with no choice but to disperse."

Alan nodded. "It seems a handful of Llewynian ships have gone out to sea. I assume that means a good number of officers and soldiers have fled. If anything, I find it strange that so many are staying behind to defend the royal capital now that the floodgates have opened on desertion."

"Perhaps she threatened to turn them into defective spellcasters. Or maybe her monster is the problem," Reggie mumbled.

The Thorn Princess nodded. "That seems most likely. Even in the other futures I saw, there were far more soldiers on her side than I would have expected. Supposing she *doesn't* have the means to turn them into defective spellcasters, they might see the monster in her entourage as a trump card."

“Perhaps they believe they’re winning in terms of raw firepower,” Emmeline suggested. “All they have to do is destroy our forces, and Llewyn will be free to occupy Farzia for as long as they please.”

A dry laugh escaped Reggie’s lips. “True. If we go down, no one else among the Farzian nobility would dare to take a stand. It’s difficult to gather men when your leader is no more.”

There, the Thorn Princess told us of the future that should have come to pass. “Fair point. In one future I saw, Farzia was left in shambles after its leader—Alan Évrard—went down in a blaze of glory. The former princess, Beatrice, was the only person left with a claim to the throne. A staggering number of soldiers had been lost in the war. Salekhard, which had chosen to stay out of the war, forced unreasonable demands upon the nation, and yet another country tried to invade. Despite coming out victorious, Farzia found itself in no less of a quandary.”

That made sense. Though Alan—the king-to-be—had died, that didn’t mean Lady Évrard could step up to replace him just like that. If things had played out the same as in the RPG, she would have been in the throes of depression. Hearing about the death of her son would have sent her spiraling even further into despair.

Even hearing the story *now* was enough to make Lady Évrard purse her lips. Meanwhile, Alan’s only reaction to being told of his own death was to heave a sigh. “But we’re not on the same track now, are we?”

“Of course we’re not. In the future you saw, did the monster come all the way over the bridge to attack us?” Reggie asked the Thorn Princess.

“It’s an avian monster, so it was a simple matter of making the flight. In yet another future I’ve seen, it attacks as soon as you cross the bridge to lay siege to the royal capital.”

“A bird, hm? Are arrows effective against it?” Alan asked.

“Not quite,” the Thorn Princess replied. “Its magic is that of flame. Any arrows fired were swiftly dropped back to earth. Ordinary soldiers would do better to focus their efforts on dodging its attacks. You’ll have to watch out for attacks from enemy soldiers in the meantime, too.”

“Oh, but it gets worse. This time around, even if we *were* to fight it head-on and win, the citizens of the royal capital would be getting slaughtered while we had our hands full with the birdie. Eeeheehee!” Master Horace cackled.

Battles always took their fair share of time. Not only did they call for moving on foot and fighting with spear or sword, but depending on how things played out, there was the risk of having to fall back and start again from square one. If we wanted to settle it in as little time

as possible, we would need magic—my golems, for example.

“I could always take it down with my magic,” I muttered. “But while I’m busy with that, the queen might realize she’s at a disadvantage and start murdering the townspeople.”

Reggie said, “But if it’s clear that you and I are absent from the start, that could put us in an even worse position. If she figures out that we’re attempting to sneak in and confront her directly, the queen might kill the citizens of the royal capital regardless. Let’s stand and fight for a time. Then, when we spot our chance... we infiltrate the royal palace to kill the queen and her monster, now isolated from the rest of their army.”

“Good idea. So long as the monster doesn’t come out to play, it’s a fight between fellow men. If you can use your magic to whittle down their forces, that will put us at an advantage. Even if the monster were to attack, we have the perfect counter for its fire magic—our frostfoxes. Besides, once our assassination squad has confronted the queen, she ought to call it back to her side. When that happens, the only ones left behind will be the cornered Farzian traitors and the Llewynians who missed their chance to run back to their homeland. We can make short work of them, no doubt.” There, Alan paused to ask Reggie, “So, who’s going? If we’re fighting magic with magic, we’ll need Kiara, the Thorn Princess, and knights to guard them. And I assume you want to go with them, right?”

Alan looked a little nervous about that, but Reggie only nodded. “It’s a fight against the queen and her magical beast. We need as many magic users on hand as we can get.”

The Thorn Princess murmured, “I think it would be fine for the prince to stay behind. Having myself, Kiara, and a dozen knights and elite soldiers should be all the firepower we need.”

That comment gave me a start. *The Thorn Princess is worried about Reggie. She’s seen him die too many times now.*

Rather than dragging him into the final battle, she probably preferred to keep him on the front lines, where we at least had a plan to keep the monster at bay. It only made sense, considering how long and hard she had worked to keep him alive.

But of course, Reggie didn’t know about any of that. “If I get in on the action, I can take my knight-guards with me. Rather than handpicking a squad of knights to send out, it would be more efficient to throw me into the fray while Alan takes up command of the troops. Besides, I have better knowledge of the secret passages through the royal palace.” He shot the Thorn Princess down instantly.

He did have a point. As the prince, Reggie ought to know of a few paths into the royal palace from the outside. We were better off having him there as a guide.

“I suppose so... I can't claim to be particularly familiar with the ins and outs of war. I'll trust your judgment.”

“Thank you. Well then, Alan, we'll be counting on you.”

“I'll just do what I always do. Write the reinforcements a note instructing them to follow my orders, will you?”

“Of course.”

With that, our plan of attack on the royal capital was decided. We were given the remainder of the day to rest up. Everyone promptly exited the tent where we had held our war council.

The Thorn Princess left as though nothing of note had happened. When I saw that, I knew I couldn't afford to be dawdling around myself. As I rose to my feet, however, Reggie called me to stay. He asked the soldiers who were still hanging around to wait outside, too.

“What's up?”

I mean, he wants to tell me something private. I can figure out that much.

“Say, Kiara. About the Thorn Princess...” Reggie faltered there, his voice growing quieter. However, he quickly thought better of that and came out with his question. “Rather than seeing the future, is her real power the ability to go back in time?”

I hesitated. How was I supposed to answer that question?

After some dithering, I responded, “Why do you ask?”

“She knows far too many specifics about ‘what should have been.’ Besides... if my hunch is correct, she's been inside the royal palace before.”

“Huh?”

“How did she plan to get inside without me? While it's true that I could simply pass down that information verbally, she didn't seem interested in asking about it whatsoever.” He went on, “I doubt she's the type to let something like that slip her mind. In which case, she should have said, ‘You don't have to go, but draw the location of the secret passages for us on a map.’”

Reggie had gotten hung up on that detail, it seemed.

“The way I see it, she didn't ask because she didn't need it. Thus, it follows that her power is not that of seeing the future, but that she has *experienced* that future once before, and that she explored the grounds of the royal palace after the war had come to an end. It only makes sense to assume she can go back in time, then, no? I don't recall her ever coming near the royal palace, after all.”

Now I got where he was coming from. If she'd merely seen a glimpse of the future, there was no reason for her to know about the hidden passages in the royal palace, considering her personal history.

Of course, I was pretty sure the *actual* reason she knew was that she was the former queen. What's more, I figured that she'd been so

preoccupied with Reggie that she hadn't thought to obfuscate what she was saying. She hadn't asked about the secret passages for the same reason, I bet.

I fretted. This was Reggie we were talking about, so if I tried to lie, I knew he would see right through it.

"You're right. But she has her own reasons for saying she can see the future instead." I attempted to get out of this with the vaguest of affirmations. "Once the war is over, I'm sure she'll tell you the whole story. There won't be a reason for her to hide it anymore."

Worse yet, I worked to put off the issue. My implication there was, *You should wait until she decides to tell you.* That way, I wouldn't have to be the one to spill the Thorn Princess's secret.

Laughing, Reggie gave me a pat on the head. "Yes, yes, I get the picture. You can't tell me. When the war has come to an end, I'll ask her about her secrets myself. I'd feel bad if I forced you to break a promise."

He totally knew I was lying.

Ugh! Did I go about it wrong? Or is Reggie just too sharp to get anything past?

When he saw the way I was losing my cool, Reggie chuckled. "You wear your heart on your sleeve, you know."

That settled it. I had to work on my poker face.

While I was setting that new goal for myself, he added, "Even if you lie to me, I know you would never work against my best interests. I don't know what you're hiding, but I'll trust that you have a good reason to keep it from me."

"Thanks."

I was so happy to hear how much he trusted me that I couldn't help breaking into a smile.



We spent the following day trekking through the Roylegart Plains. Faced with a force of nearly 20,000 men, the Llewynians in the nearby town chose to keep their heads down, making no effort to impede our march.

Just before dusk fell, we stopped not far from the Leun River, which ran parallel to the royal capital. Tomorrow, reinforcements would be arriving from upstream. We had decided to wait for them to join us before pushing forward. Though the reinforcements were rushing to get to us, we had come earlier than anticipated, so it was going to take another day for them to arrive.

Nevertheless, it was the eve of the final battle. Now that we had some time to catch our breath—though we had to remain vigilant, of course—the soldiers all seemed vaguely antsy. They weren't chatting

as much as usual. The silence that had fallen over our army was making *me* anxious in turn.

At the same time, however, I felt a rush of emotion. If everything went as planned tomorrow, I would finally come face-to-face with the queen.

From beside a stone platform I'd erected for patrolling the area, I gazed out toward the royal capital. The city shone even in the dark of night; I could faintly make out lights in the distance.

I had brought Lila along with me as a bodyguard. It seemed Master Horace had finally gotten used to being around her; he was there too, and he wasn't even clamoring at her to stay away.

"Getting cold feet?" he asked.

"Nah. It just feels so strange, thinking about how we're about to kill the queen and finally put an end to all this."

That got a cackle out of him. "What, you're *that* sure you're going to win? Now that's what I call hubris! Eeeheehee!"

"What?!"

That comment came as a shock, but thinking about it, that really was how I'd been thinking about it. Part of me had felt that if this were the world of the RPG, we just *had* to win.

But now...

"When I realized we would be going to war, I was afraid that Reggie might die. I was so desperate to stop it from happening... but thinking back on it, some part of me was a little complacent, too. 'If we follow the plot of the RPG, we'll win.' But once the situation changed, and the enemy ended up stronger than ever before, and we ran into foes who were never supposed to show up in the first place, I started to worry a little. The time I got most anxious about losing was when I was captured by Isaac, I think."

The Battle of Trisphede never could have happened in the RPG. It was a fight against Salekhard—and the final showdown with Lord Credias.

It was once we'd gotten past that, after we'd had to call on Reggie's magic, that I'd started thinking about things differently.

"If anything, I've started thinking of it more like I'm wielding the knowledge of another person who went through this war, just like the Thorn Princess did."

"So it's more than just a fairy tale to you now."

"Exactly."

This wasn't some fairy tale we were destined to win. It was reality—but one shaped by someone who had peeked into our history and saw fit to change it.

What had allowed me to finally acknowledge that was slaying Lord Credias, who personified all the nightmares of this world... as

well as Reggie staying by my side and telling me he loved me.

That was all the more reason it was so hard to register that defeating the queen would put an end to all this.

“There won’t be any moving forward unless we take her down, of course. It’s just hard to believe there’s a true reality waiting for us past that point.”

“A ‘true’ reality, eh? Well, no one will be able to go back to their old lives until this war ends. In that sense, we *are* pretty disconnected from reality right now. Either way, I can’t wait to see what *your* reality shapes up to be. Heeheehee!” Master Horace gave a delighted laugh before adding, “Still, knowing how you are, I never imagined you’d leave his side today of all days. There’s no telling what might happen, considering you’re going up against the woman who took out the margrave’s kid. It’s hard to imagine *anything* could kill that boy.”

He had every reason to be worried. Whether Lord Credias was the reason behind it or not, the Thorn Princess had always acted independently up until Sestina. If she had determined she needed to come along *now*, there was probably some real trouble in store for us.

“I mean, we were just together. Besides, he’ll be by my side all day tomorrow.”

Even if we were to lose, I’d be with him in my last moments. If we’d been planning to go our separate ways, I bet I would have been terrified to leave his side for even a second—but knowing that we would be together, there was no reason to be so loath to part.

“Tch! Get a load of this sap.”

Master Horace’s grumblings drew a laugh out of me, and together we spent the remainder of the night in peace.

The next day, around noon... the battle began.

Chapter 6: The Final Battle

The battle started when our respective patrol units spotted the reinforcements coming from upstream. The enemy had clearly suspected that Farzian reinforcements would be traveling down the river by boat, seeing as they had split up their troops and stationed soldiers close to both our position and theirs from the start.

Farzia's noble coalition of traitors was positioned near the bridge leading to the high road. The Llewynians who had been waiting upstream, meanwhile, started firing off their arrows at the incoming boat.

As our Farzian troops marched forward to join up with the reinforcements, the troops blocking the bridge began shooting away at us. For the moment, we halted just outside the range of those arrows.

"I'll start us off with some magic."

Just as I was about to form a golem to raise some hell, the rain of enemy arrows abruptly came to a stop—and several driver-less carriages came rolling our way. There were a few people packed into the cargo areas.

"What's that all about?" I puzzled aloud, tilting my head to one side.

Alan, who had been squinting to see what was going on, started barking orders to the troops. "Fire! Kill them, horses and all! Those are defective spellcasters, I'm sure of it!"

Our archers rushed out ahead of the strike force lined up in the front, firing off their arrows. Some of the horses were shot down, and three of the carriages came to a halt just after crossing the river. The remaining four carriages had drawn much closer to the Farzian army by the time their horses were struck down, however, and the passengers were thrown from the carriages as they toppled over.

"They're not soldiers," I whispered.

The riders hit the ground without putting up a hint of a fight, and it was clear to see that they were clad in neither armor nor capes to denote their allegiance. On the contrary, some of these people dressed in dark clothing appeared to be female servants.

It was obvious that they were noncombatants.

Though they struggled to pull themselves upright, screaming in agony as they did, it wasn't long before their bodies were engulfed in flame.

“If I had to guess, they resorted to using civilians to keep the soldiers’ morale from dropping any lower,” Cain posited. “I wager they offered up the servants of their own households. If they had chosen soldiers as their sacrifices, no matter *how* much they were paying their men, they would inevitably be faced with more deserters.”

The very thought of it made me shudder.

“I knew Llewynne was accusing its men of crimes left and right to get their supply of defective spellcasters, but *this*? It’ll preserve the morale of their soldiers, sure, but if they’re resorting to tricks like this, they must know this is the end of the line for them,” said Master Horace.

“Why do you say that?”

“There are plenty of nobles out there who have never treated their servants like people a day in their lives. But things are pretty different in Farzia, aren’t they? For how many brushes they have with the neighboring nations, the nobles know they don’t stand a chance if the people of their own territory turn against them. I’ve always figured that’s why folks here tend to care more for their subordinates and servants than in other countries. The servants are used to that treatment, too. Taking all that into account, to dump a bunch of civilians onto the battlefield? No way someone won’t try to assassinate them in their sleep after *that*.”

That made me think back to something else I’d heard. A while ago, Gina had called the knights of Farzia “well-mannered.” The nobility and knights of Master Horace’s homeland of Salekhard—and plenty of other countries, too—must have been even crueler than I’d imagined.

It was hard to get a sense of that for myself, though. Thus far, I’d barely interacted with the knights of Salekhard, and since I was always the one threatening them, they were way too scared of me to try any funny business.

“Now that the prince is on his way to claiming victory, the thought of being held accountable for conspiring with the queen must have them terrified. With their backs to the wall, perhaps they believe their only option is to go out in a blaze of glory here and now.”

“In which case, it’s no wonder they aren’t giving much thought to the future.”

After listening to Cain and Master Horace’s conversation, I realized that the nobles who had sided with the queen had come here prepared to lose. It was precisely because of that resolve that they’d given up on choosing their means.

There was one thing that concerned me even more than that.

“Is it really possible for them *all* to manifest the fire element?”

This definitely felt different from all my prior encounters with defective spellcasters. I'd had the same thought back when we defeated Lord Patriciél, and it was happening with an even larger crowd of people this time around.

Several of the defective spellcasters were struck down by our rain of arrows, after which they swiftly crumbled away into sand. Others, however, possessed magic powerful enough to burn the arrows to ash. Said survivors had begun shambling toward the Farzian troops. Worse yet, another carriage full of defective spellcasters was hurtling our way from behind them.

"There's no end to them!" Alan bemoaned with a click of his tongue.

"Can I go ahead with the plan, Alan?" I asked. "I'll bring out a golem and take down the defective spellcasters along the way!"

"Good idea. No use in wasting time," he consented with a nod, then started shouting new orders to his soldiers. "Charge in after the spellcaster's golem! Our pikemen should finish off whatever defectives she leaves alive! Everyone else, keep your distance!"

I summoned three golems. This time around, I didn't use Master Horace to guide them; I made them all remote-control operated.

My golems, each as tall as a two-story building, took off in a sprint. They stomped over the bridge of the Luen River, trampling a carriage underfoot along the way. A crunch much like that of a tree snapping in two echoed throughout the area, and I couldn't help but shudder.

These weren't people who had come out to the battlefield to fight, yet I still had to kill them. The thought of it was tearing me up inside. Still, I knew that there was no saving them at this point, and that dragging this battle out any further would only lead to more and more victims. I couldn't afford to hesitate.

My golems rushed straight toward enemy lines, where they took to flattening and kicking around the soldiers. Unlike the Llewynians, the enemy Farzians had never fought me before. My golems' assault had them running for their lives, and it was far easier to pare down their numbers than I was used to.

Alan's troops charged forward, following close behind my golems. The four defective spellcasters who had been left standing were slain by soldiers who had been ready and waiting for the opportunity.

My golems alone had already sent the enemy nobles into chaos, so this assault only pushed them further over the edge. Yet for some reason, they still refused to withdraw.

As had been the original plan, my next move was to build another bridge downstream. It would allow even more of our soldiers to charge in, and it would give us an extra path of retreat, too.

However, just as we were crossing the river, Alan abruptly called our troops to a halt.

“There it is—the monster!”

When I looked in the direction he was pointing, I spotted an enormous bird, its long tail swathed in flame. The monster disregarded the battle before it, swooping straight for the Farzian troops.

“It’s coming this way!” I shouted.

Master Horace wildly flapped his arms, accompanied by a frantic chorus of *clack-clack-clack* sounds. “This isn’t good; you need to get out of here, little disciple! I’ll bet you anything it’s being drawn toward the strongest source of mana around!”

To me, in other words.

“Miss Kiara!”

Cain scooped me up, ready to make a run for it. I stopped him there.

“We won’t make it in time! I’m better off intercepting it!” I insisted.

Using the copper ore I had prepared for the occasion, I summoned a brand-new golem from the earth.

Having let go of my hand, Cain started shouting orders. “Someone bring Gina over!”

Meanwhile, I had my golem—which I had built with an eye for height, not girth—rise to its feet. Now that the bird monster had flown within spitting distance, my titan reached out and made a grab for it. The bird dove out of the way, dropping a rain of fire as it went.

“We need to evacuate! Get everyone away from me!” I shouted at the nearby soldiers.

Are we not going to make it in time?!

An image of the soldiers before me getting caught in the crossfire flashed through my mind, but before it could become reality, vines sprang from the ground to cover their heads like an umbrella, diminishing the heat of the flames.

It was the Thorn Princess.

When I looked around for her, I spotted her a little farther back, controlling her vines under a protective canopy of her own making.

“Fire! Even if your arrows burn up, it will serve to distract it!” came Alan’s command.

Arrows began to fly from behind us. The beast twirled through the air to avoid them, however, and the archers couldn’t very well go on shooting their arrows straight overhead—or worse, in the same direction as their allies.

Perhaps the monster had picked up on that little setback. It soared up to a height the projectiles couldn’t hope to reach, only to then

make a dive for me and my golem.

I scrambled to form an earthen roof to provide cover for me and Cain. The flames the beast spouted our way were swelteringly hot. When I let out a shriek despite myself, Cain pulled me into his arms to shield me.

“Just focus on controlling your golem, Miss Kiara.”

The second the flames died down, Cain let go of me, arming himself with a spear someone had dropped and taking aim at the monster. Now that it was done spitting fire for the time being, it once again ascended through the air to escape the barrage of arrows.

It was sure to come back down, though. That was probably the moment Cain was waiting for.

No matter how you sliced it, he was being far too reckless. There was a good chance he would be hit by the flames before the spear could even leave his hand. Just as I was about to stop him, however, the spear he was holding started to elongate—encrusted with white ice.

The beast swooped back down, spewing its flames. As I ducked back under my earthen roof for shelter, I saw a blizzard kick up behind Cain, dispelling the fire.

Just as the monster neared the earth, Cain’s spear ran straight through one of its wings. A shrill cry, almost like that of a crow’s, echoed through the fields.

I spotted a frostfox slamming it with another snowstorm. The beast rose into the air, just barely managing to skirt my golem’s attacks as it flew.

It swirled higher and higher into the sky, now much more cautious of what we might try.

“Kiara!”

That was when Reggie showed up.

“It’s too dangerous for you to be here, Reggie!”

There was no telling when the monster might unleash another torrent of fire. Nevertheless, Reggie guided me out from under my earthen roof with a curt, “I have the frostfoxes with me, so I’ll be fine.” He then added, “We’re going to drive that monster away, just the way we planned it. Do you think you can pull it off?”

“Yeah.”

Reggie held his sword at the ready. What lay beyond the tip of his sword was the form of the beast.

I placed my hand on his left shoulder. If the monster was flying through the air, we would have to strike it down with the strongest projectile we had. We’d determined as much ahead of time.

Lightning shot from the tip of Reggie’s sword. The monster probably hadn’t seen that attack coming; although it steered clear of a

direct hit, part of its tail had been clipped, blood spattering through the air.

Now that the creature had been stunned, my golem reached up and batted it away with one hand. Though it briefly started to plummet to the earth, it soon rose into the air once more. It strewed flames over the battleground across the bridge as some petty form of retaliation before retreating beyond the walls of the royal capital.

“Your Highness!” Felix rushed over to Reggie’s side. “Thanks to the golem’s assistance, our reinforcements have successfully forced the Llewynians back. Shall we go back them up?”

“Yes. Let’s get across the river. Call for Groul and the others. It’s time to pivot to our next strategy.”

Making use of the soldiers who had started to gather now that the monster had left, he sent off orders every which way. Before long, Reggie’s team of knights and ten of the most elite soldiers from Évrard’s ranks had banded together. The Thorn Princess was there, too.

Just as we were about to head out, Gina called me to a stop. “You should bring at least one of these little guys with you, Kiara,” she said, giving Reynard a pat on the back. “Lila’s too big to escape attention, which I imagine would get in the way of your mission. But Reynard here? He ought to do just fine.”

“There’s a chance he might not make it back safe, though.”

If we lost the battle, Reynard would be left all alone in the royal palace. It would be just awful to leave him somewhere no help would be coming, likely to be hunted down by countless soldiers—or so I thought, but Gina said, “It’ll be fine. Frostfoxes have the means to protect themselves if worse comes to worst. Besides, if your opponent is fighting with fire, it only makes sense to have an ice monster around.”

“And hey, you won’t be waiting *too* long before we rush into the royal capital and catch up to you,” Girsch chimed in, playful as ever.

The frostfoxes were supposed to be staying behind with the troops attacking the royal capital—Gina and Girsch among them—to help camouflage the spellcaster’s absence.

From here on out, Alan, Gina, and the rest of the men would be launching a head-on assault against the royal capital. The plan was to slay the queen while the enemy troops were distracted.

“Alright. We’ll take good care of Reynard.”

Relieved smiles rose to Gina’s and Girsch’s faces once I’d accepted their offer.

“First off, let me break down the capital walls for you!”

I ran my golems, which had been stomping around the enemy ranks, toward the walls of the royal capital in one mad dash. Picking

up on what I was trying to do, the enemy moved in to try to stop them. Perhaps because I'd built it a little on the smaller side, one of them toppled over when its leg crumbled away, but the other two grabbed hold of the wall and got to demolishing it.

Panicked, the enemy launched a concentrated attack on my golems. Despite their best efforts, however, the giants managed to open up a large hole in the wall before they went down.



Now we had ourselves a path into the royal capital.

Alan marched our entire army over the bridge. By this point, the enemy coalition of nobles had escaped beyond the wall. Considering we'd had them at a disadvantage, it only made sense that they would run back to their home court.

With the walls of the royal capital to shield them, the enemy had started tossing out defective spellcasters again, leaving Alan unsure how to proceed.

"That's fine," said Reggie. "The more time it takes, the longer you'll be able to hold their attention." He then ordered me to attack the Llewynian reinforcements coming from upstream.

I sent off the golems I'd crafted to combat the monster to meet the reinforcements. It seemed this group had some experience fighting my titans, judging by how hard they focused their efforts on taking it down. They churned out more defective spellcasters, demolishing one of its legs to stop it in its tracks. Once the golem was immobilized, the Llewynians took to slashing away at it en masse.

It wasn't going to be much longer before the golem went down, but that was fine. It had done its job of holding the enemy at bay.

Lightning shot from Reggie's sword once more, striking down the Llewynian soldiers and my golem along with them. Screams rang out, and the ground rumbled beneath us. It was hard to see from so low on the ground, but I was pretty sure a considerable number of the enemies surrounding my golem had died.

Realizing that was their cue to pull out, the Llewynians escaped beyond the capital walls.

"Alan can handle the rest," Reggie suggested.

Skirting around the reinforcements as they joined up with the Farzian troops, we entered the forest to the north of the royal capital. Based on what we'd heard from our scouts, there were hardly any enemy soldiers stationed in the woods. It seemed the majority were busy guarding the walls of the royal capital, a section of which had been built around part of the forest.

Following Reggie's orders, we forged our way through the woods. Partway through the trek, we entrusted our steeds to the scouts, asked

them to walk the horses back to the troops, and traversed the rest of the untracked path on foot.

Eventually, we arrived at a riverbank peppered with enormous stones. Somewhere close to a small cliff—only a little bit taller than a full-grown adult—there were rocks aged with moss and covered in ivy. Said rocks were piled one on top of the other, forming a miniature mountain that towered higher than any person. A handful of the boulders were cut at an unnatural right angle.

“This was a dumping ground for surplus stones during the construction of the royal palace. There are a few different spots like this within the forest. The majority of them are red herrings. Only this one is the real deal,” Reggie explained, pointing out one of the many rocks.

Brushing away the ivy growing over the boulder revealed a narrow gap in the mountain of rocks. It was only barely big enough for a man to squeeze through.

With lanterns we’d prepared for the occasion in hand, several soldiers led the way through the opening.

“Past this gap, there’s a passageway lined with stone,” Reggie informed me. “The floor will be damp, so watch your step.”

I nodded, then followed him into the tunnel. Though it was a rather narrow passage, the ceiling was plenty high. It was dead quiet inside, too. Not a single enemy in sight. The only sounds were the steady breathing of my companions, along with the echo of our footsteps.

I didn’t have a lantern of my own, so it was hard to see where I was walking—or anything else, for that matter. All I could do was stick to Reggie’s back like glue.

Along the way, we came across two different forks in the path. Each time, we would come to a stop, wait for someone’s hushed inquiry of which way to go and Reggie’s subsequent directions, then resume our trek.

We must have walked for nearly thirty minutes. The longer we traipsed through the narrow passageway, the more claustrophobic I started to feel. Just as I was really beginning to get antsy, the path started sloping upward.

“The stairs start around here. Watch your feet,” Reggie warned me.

I climbed the staircase, using the tips of my toes to fumble around for each step. When we finally made it to the surface, we stepped out into a grove, the leaves on the trees dyed yellow and red.

“This is still the forest of the royal palace. We’re a good distance from the walls here—just northeast of the palace itself. To get inside the building without being seen, we’ll be taking one more passageway

from here.” As Reggie explained, he pointed to a spot on the map we had brought along with us. “There’s a hut for the groundskeeper a little ways ahead, and inside is a path that leads under the palace.”

“First we’ll need to take care of any enemies hanging around the hut,” Cain said, peering down at the map.

The Thorn Princess responded, “I’m best at stalling for time or holding enemies down, but perhaps I could shut them up before they can call for help.”

“Why don’t we go through them one by one?” the knight suggested. “We pick out a target, have the Thorn Princess seal their movements, and take them out on the spot.”

“How about I—?”

Before I could offer to contribute, the Thorn Princess shot me down. “You and His Highness ought to save your strength. Don’t worry; you’ll have *more* than enough to do before long.”

That was enough to convince me, so I backed off without a fight. Reggie, on the other hand, followed up with, “Does that mean we’ll be using a lot of magic in the coming battle?”

“In the future I’ve seen, there weren’t any defective spellcasters in play. Her beast was all we had to contend with. This time around, however, we’ll have to be on the lookout for defectives from the moment we set foot in the palace. Plus...” She faltered there, as if it were hard to find the right words. After a short pause, she went on, “For each brush His Highness has had with death, any attempts to avoid that fate have only led to a harsher predicament down the line, wouldn’t you say?”

The fight against Lord Credias had been pretty tough indeed. Our victory really had come down to pure luck.

“I can’t gaze into the future whenever I so please. Thus, the only fight against the queen I’ve witnessed was that of the margrave’s son, Alan. It wasn’t the queen he went down to, exactly; it was her monster. Of course, he’s too far away to fight the beast now, but there’s no guarantee that the same fate won’t befall *you* if you face her in his stead. There’s no telling if the monster’s power is exactly as I remember it, either.

“So be careful,” she warned us. “No matter what tricks the queen has up her sleeve, we’re going to need magic. Depending on what happens, we might even need you two to take her on alone while the rest of our soldiers escape. Thus, we should let those men handle whatever matters they still can. Otherwise, the queen may very well wipe us out.”

“I see. That makes sense, I suppose.”

Both Reggie and Cain nodded, satisfied by the Thorn Princess’s explanation.

Our first order of business was to secure our entrance route into the royal palace. Stationed near the hut were several Llewynian soldiers who had been left in charge of patrolling the woods. It appeared the building had been repurposed as a lookout post.

To get the ball rolling, the Thorn Princess seized a soldier who had stepped just outside the view of the window with her vines, gagging him in the process. Our soldiers stepped in right away to make swift work of the man.

We hadn't pulled it off without making *some* noise, however, and a soldier came out from the hut to investigate. The Thorn Princess's vines darted into the building, dragging its occupants outside. Our soldiers did away with those men, too.

I buried the fallen enemies beneath the earth. It doubled as a means of erasing the evidence, ensuring that the soldiers who came for the next shift wouldn't find out what had happened here.

The tunnel to the royal palace was under the floorboards of the hut. Shoving aside the furniture in the way, we squeezed ourselves into yet another narrow passageway. The Thorn Princess used her vines to move everything back where it had been.

With that, we had bought ourselves a little extra time.



The tunnel leading to the royal palace was a lot wider than the other one we'd just been in. It was big enough for two people to walk side by side, and the ceiling was pretty high. It was still gloomy as all get-out, and having no clue how far we'd have to go to reach the exit was a bummer, but the extra bit of breathing room put me a little more at ease.

Most importantly, using a secret passageway meant the enemy was a lot less likely to stumble upon us. We had kept our squad pretty small, since that was a better formation for combating magic and monsters, but that also made us vulnerable to a group attack. Our goal was to make it to the queen unscathed and undetected.

It wasn't too much longer before we arrived at the exit.

"Is the coast clear?" Reggie inquired, pausing to take stock of the situation.

"Oh, want me to make a peephole?" I asked.

If the wall on the other side was likewise made of stone, it would be easy enough for me to carve through it. Reggie took me up on my offer, and I opened up two peepholes for our soldiers to peek through. Once they had given the room a look-see, we made our way into the castle.

We emerged in the king's chambers. In each of the four corners of the vast room, there stood a pillar too thick to wrap one's arms

around. It turned out that one of them hid the entrance to the secret passageway. The room had been decorated with the columns to conceal the seams in the floor.

We were the only ones in the room. There was a bed made with a quilt woven from silk and colored threads, along with a table and chair. A sofa, too. Though the room looked beautifully furnished at a first glance, what with its gorgeous chests and wardrobes, it was also a total mess—like someone had recently used it and forgot to pick up after themselves.

“Let’s start by looking for the queen. If possible, we should take a couple of her soldiers alive and see what information we can get out of them. Barring that... perhaps we should check where she *would* have been in our unrealized future,” said Reggie, flicking his gaze to the Thorn Princess.

“In the future I saw, she was in her throne room.”

“In that case, we ought to start heading in that direction and see if we can extort a soldier along the way,” Groul suggested.

With that, our course was set. After I’d opened up yet another hole in the wall and peeked outside, we headed out of the king’s chambers.

The corridors of the royal palace were surprisingly quiet. There was no telling when the Farzian army might storm the palace; given the circumstances, I would have figured the halls would be abuzz with retainers urging the queen to flee, soldiers scurrying around to fortify the castle’s defenses and buy her some time, or noblemen handing out orders.

Maybe all the period dramas I used to watch on TV have gone to my head. I can’t imagine what else a castle might look like right before it falls.

Still, *this* level of silence just felt like an anticlimax. No matter how things looked, though, we couldn’t afford to let our guard down. There was always the chance the enemy had hidden themselves around the palace in anticipation of our invasion.

We pressed onward, keeping a careful eye on our surroundings. Cain was casting glances left and right, prepared for the worst.

The king’s chambers were on the third floor. The throne room was on the second, so we had to take the stairs to get there.

As we headed toward the staircase, we came across two guards who had just come up to the third floor. It sounded like they had already made up their minds to abandon ship.

“I heard there are *two* spellcasters in the prince’s army now!”

“No matter how many defective spellcasters we threw their way, it didn’t even make a dent! What choice do we have but to run?”

“Now’s our chance. I don’t see any lookouts around—”

He was abruptly cut off there. One of our soldiers was holding

him at knifepoint, a hand clamped over his mouth. The very next moment, both men were dragged into the secret chamber where the rest of us had gathered.

"Make a sound and you're dead," Groul threatened, which shut them up fast.

Evidently, they were both soldiers of a Farzian nobleman. They had responded to the draft after their leader, who had thrown in his lot with Llewyrne, had claimed it would give them a chance to work in the royal palace.

The men coughed up the queen's location, begging us to spare their lives. From the sound of it, she really *was* in the throne room, after all.

"How many soldiers does she have with her?"

"A few? That isn't my department, so I couldn't tell you the exact numbers. What I *did* hear is that she has slaves from Llewyrne waiting on her, too."

"Slaves?" I parroted back in a whisper.

"Must be planning to turn them into defective spellcasters," Master Horace murmured.

That explained it. Instead of keeping a ton of soldiers on hand to protect herself, she had crafted a scenario where she could churn out defectives at the drop of a hat.

Hmm. Still, what is she thinking? I thought to myself, finding something odd about all this. *I don't understand why she insists on sticking around when she's so clearly on the losing side. Is it because she declared herself ruler? Or does she have some other reason she can't go back to Llewyrne?*

"Or maybe... she's just waiting for us to kill her?" I mused aloud. That was the only way her actions made sense.

The Thorn Princess responded to my mutterings. "In the future I witnessed, she didn't seem terribly distraught over her death. I'm sure she knew that as long as she killed Alan, Farzia would inevitably fall apart at the seams. I assume she considered her own life an acceptable price to pay for that."

That sure sounded like the kind of thing that might run through a villainess's head. Still, why was she so hellbent on sabotaging Farzia? Was it because she was born in an enemy nation?

Now that we'd gotten the intel we needed out of them, we tied up the two soldiers and left them in the room for the time being. Though all those questions were still eating away at me, I headed out alongside Reggie and the others.

When we arrived at the staircase and peeked down at the floor below, we could see a good number of soldiers wandering to and fro.

"I'm not sure there's much we can do but rush past them," Felix

remarked. “We knights can act as the bait. The rest of you should run ahead while we keep them occupied.”

Reggie took him up on his offer without the slightest hesitation. “Alright.”

Felix charged down the stairs, taking five other knights with him. Despite their frantic attempts to back away from the stairs, three enemy soldiers were taken out on the spot. By the time the rest of us had caught up and rushed past Felix, however, a handful of soldiers on standby had come running out from a nearby door. There were about ten of them in total.

Worse yet, even more soldiers were coming up from the first floor. Felix and his knights were positioned to defend us, fighting off soldiers to our rear, but this was clearly too trying a task for them to handle alone.

“Wha—Miss Kiara?!”

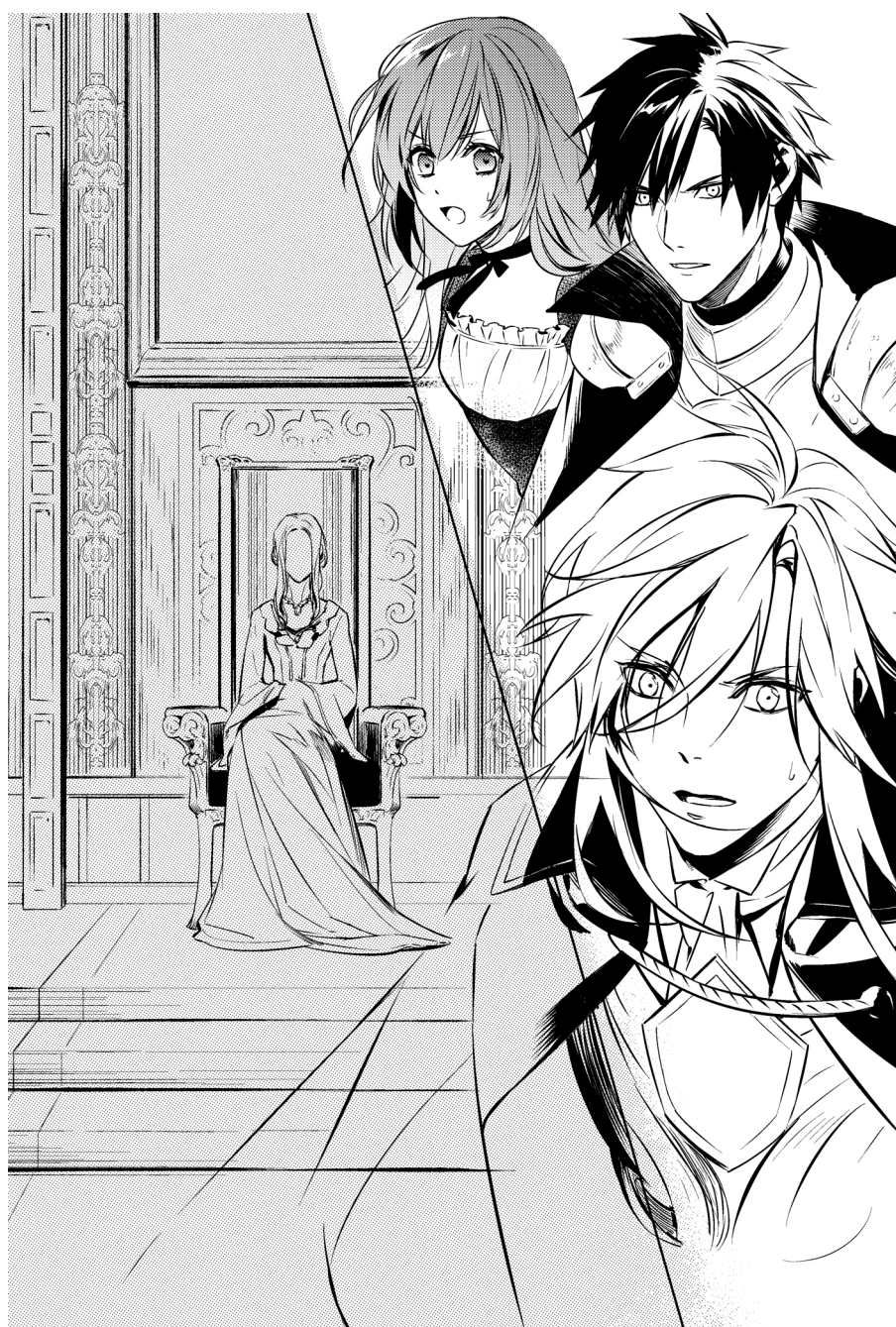
“Just let me get a *little* magic in!”

With a tiny battle cry, I opened up several holes in the stairs. A few of the soldiers fell through the pitfalls, while others were taken out of commission when they tripped and injured themselves.

Now that I’d done my part, Cain dragged me along after Reggie, and together we slipped through a massive, wide-open set of doors.

We had made it to the throne room. A red carpet ran down the center of the chamber, marking the path to the main attraction. Beyond it were three steps that led to an enormous chair adorned in gold.

Sitting upon it was a woman with chestnut-colored hair, clad in a green dress without a train.



I knew who she was before she could even say her name. I'd seen her in my dreams countless times before—Queen Marianne of Farzia.

Gaunt though her figure was, she rose to her feet quite gracefully and greeted Reggie. "Oh, how long I've waited for this—for the day I kill you."

With a wave of her hand, she signaled the soldiers flanking a cage set up near the throne. Trapped inside said cage were slaves, just as the two captured soldiers' intel would have suggested. Dressed in nothing but burlap sacks, they were slumped listlessly on the floor.

The soldiers pointed their spears at the cage. No doubt the tips had been coated in contract sand. If we didn't do something now, those poor prisoners were going to end up as defective spellcasters.

I placed my hands on the floor and attempted to cast my magic. My plan was to shield the cage from those spears by besetting it in stone.

Unfortunately, the deafening, raven-like screech that tore through the room forced me to press a hand to one ear, effectively putting a stop to my spell.

"Miss Kiara!" came Cain's shout. Groul and the royal guard called out to Reggie, too, only for their voices to be drowned out in a thunderous roar and the vibrations that followed.

I couldn't tell what had happened right away. Cain had pulled me into his arms to shield me, and it wasn't until he let me go that I could finally observe the tragic state of the room.

The windows and walls of the throne room had been shattered, leaving debris strewn all over the floor. The slaves in the cage did indeed have spears wedged deep in their flesh, but the soldiers who had once wielded them had been knocked aside, collapsed a good distance away or crushed underneath the rubble.

The queen, meanwhile, was untouched. Light on her feet, she strolled over to a vast balcony past the walls and windows.

There, an avian monster swooped down to stand before her.

It must have been this monster that destroyed the walls. Now that I was looking at it up close, I could see that its trunk alone was the size of a bear. Its feathers a mix of green and red, the birdlike beast was swathed in crimson flame.

While the rest of us assumed a fighting stance, the queen stood languidly upon her stage, the hem of her dress swaying in the wind of the balcony.

"A pity Credias failed to get rid of you. I worked ever so hard to accommodate him, but the man was useless to the end," she said, letting slip a small giggle.

She was the very picture of composure. Was her monster really

that strong? Was that why she didn't seem to think she was in any danger?

"Why, I even recounted the affairs of a certain girl he couldn't get over in loving detail, hoping it would inspire him to kill the prince—but alas, I heard that his downfall was getting too preoccupied with the girl herself. So *you're* this Kiara I've heard so much about, hm?"

She looked straight at me. The chill in her gaze was enough to send a shiver down my spine. It only made sense that she would look at me that way, considering she *was* out to kill us, but something about it put me strangely on edge.

In my dreams, no matter what horrible things the queen had done, she had never looked at me with hostility in her eyes; perhaps that was the reason behind my discomfort. Now that I was her enemy, she had no reason to show her pawn any compassion.

The skewered slaves had begun to writhe in their cage. Upon yanking the spears from their own bodies, flames gushed from the wounds. When the bird let out a shrill cry, they rose to their feet, melted the cage around them, and began walking toward us with tottering steps.

"They're all fire users again..."

Each and every one of the defective spellcasters was commanding flame. It was exactly like the final attempt Lord Patriciél had made on our lives, as well as the time all the defectives outside the royal capital had wielded fire magic.

Master Horace said, "I'll bet you anything the beast has something to do with it. It seems like they're all dancing to its tune, too."

"Aha. So it's the monster's doing."

She's using her command over the beast to turn the slaves into fire spellcasters, huh?

A second's worth of thought could tell me that the monster's element was fire, too. Lord Patriciél's men had manifested earth, but considering the tiny earth monster he'd had with him, it would follow that he'd fed it the powder of the same contract stone.

"Either way, I doubt I'm going to be of much help here," the Thorn Princess said. "I'll focus on attacking the queen. That should force her to draw away some of the defective spellcasters to defend herself."

"Very well," replied Reggie. "Groul, I want you and your men to fight the defective spellcasters. Stay on guard in case more soldiers rush in from behind us. Reynard, you're in charge of shielding us from the flames."

He glanced over at the frostfox, waiting for his approval. When he responded by exhaling a puff of white frost, a look of delight on his foxy little features, the prince couldn't help but laugh.

“As for you, Kiara...”

“Let’s take down the monster, Reggie. I’ll leave my golem in your hands, Master Horace!”

“Ooh, let me at ’em!”

That was all I had to say for Master Horace to catch on to my plan.

Taking into account the height of the ceiling and the amount of space he’d have to move around, I made a golem about three times the size of a person, to which I then docked Master Horace. Once that was done, I hung back just behind Reggie.

Hoping to get a sense for how the monster would fight, I had my Horace-equipped golem spring into action.

“Eeeheehee!”

Master Horace charged right for the beast. With how many times he’d done this by now, he was practically an expert at piloting his golem.

He started off by swinging punch after punch at the monster. Since the bird was hovering just outside the building proper, however, all it had to do was lift itself into the air to dodge.

The golem gave up on pursuing the monster further, instead turning on the queen.

“If we just kill the root of the problem, we’ve got this in the bag!”

While Master Horace was in the midst of spouting that borderline villainous line, the monster swooped down to deliver his golem a swift kick in the head.

“Whoa!”

The titan took a tumble, only to be showered in flame as the monster spat fire from its mouth. The might of the flames was too much for it to handle; the golem’s legs dissolved into sand in the face of the heat and the magic, and the rest of its body soon toppled to the ground.

Thankfully, the Thorn Princess had jumped into action the moment the golem had launched its attack. She grew the flowers from a broken vase into vines of roses, which snaked forward and tried to catch the queen in their grasp as she approached the golem from behind.

A few steps to the side was all it took for the queen to dodge those vines—but the Thorn Princess had been banking on that.

The rose vines shot past her, all the way beyond the fence of the balcony. Channeled along the roses, a myriad of thorns soon blanketed the balcony in waves.

The queen’s face twisted in displeasure. Just as her monster had been in the midst of attacking the golem, she called it back and had it burn away the thorns around her.

“The queen is controlling her beast somehow. No doubt about it now,” remarked the Thorn Princess.

No sooner had she said that than a horde of defective spellcasters descended upon her. A few of Reggie’s knights stepped in to stave them off. Groul and the royal guard were currently duking it out with the rest of the defective spellcasters.

“Burn them to cinders,” the queen commanded.

She probably intended for her monster to breathe its fire over every last one of us from its place outside the room. The bird struck a pose right over the queen’s head.

“Kiara!” Reggie, who had hardly moved throughout all of this, signaled me from behind.

I placed my hand on his shoulder, and Reggie lifted his sword toward the heavens. The moment the bird opened its mouth to spew its flames, he let rip a ball of lightning that nearly rivaled the size of a person.

It struck the monster right as it unleashed its fire. The flames dispersed and the monster’s beak snapped off in the aftershock, breast and belly feathers flying everywhere.

The beast let out a piercing shriek.

We fired off our second shot without a moment to lose. Lightning clipped the bird’s legs as it made to escape, sending it hurtling through the air.

That was the last direct hit Reggie and I managed to land on the monster, however; the defective spellcasters had hurled themselves upon us.

I had *planned* to use the floor under our feet and the wreckage strewn about to skewer them, but seeing as we also had to dodge the flames the monster was spitting our way from where it had crumpled to the floor, I had my hands full just building a stone wall to shield us.

Flames filled my vision to the point that I couldn’t even see what was happening on the other side of the wall. In my moment of panic, a defective spellcaster dove in to strike. Reynard froze the man’s limbs with a magical blizzard, slowing his movements and bringing the flames gushing from his body under control. Cain then dealt him the finishing blow, his sword dyed white with Reynard’s magic.

“Miss Kiara, Your Highness! Get back!”

We had dealt with the immediate problem, but it was impossible to tell when an enemy might pop out like this. Cain must have been worried we were going to end up caught unawares.

“No, it’s fine now. The flames are dying down.”

The moment Reggie said as much, the flames subsided. I could finally catch sight of the knights of the royal guard—who were zealously putting down the defective spellcasters headed our way—

and the Thorn Princess—who had imprisoned the queen in a cocoon of thorny vines. I saw Master Horace’s golem catching defective spellcasters in its grasp as the queen called on them to defend her. I also spotted several soldiers retreating, having suffered burns from the fire.

Now that my vision had cleared, there was a lot more I could do.

I started by taking down the defective spellcasters closest to me. I manipulated the stone floor to puncture them through the legs, and once I’d sealed them in place, our knights plunged their swords through their hearts from behind.

Master Horace tossed another defective spellcaster off the balcony and into the garden below.

Now all that remained was the queen, currently restrained by the Thorn Princess, along with her wounded beast.

“Shall we call on her to surrender?” Groul asked in a low voice, casting a glance Reggie’s way and awaiting his orders.

Reggie shook his head. “I don’t believe she has any intention of doing so. She had all the time in the world to flee, yet she forced her soldiers to fight and defend the royal capital to the end. I’m sure this is where she plans to die.”

He took a step forward. I removed the stone wall blocking his path, tagging along after him while staying on guard against the queen and her monster. Cain stood at the front to tighten our guard. Reynard trailed behind me.

A shrill cry spilled from deep within the monster’s broken beak. And yet, it didn’t move a muscle—because the queen hadn’t ordered it to, perhaps.

Reggie came to a stop a safe distance away from the beast. I kneeled down on the spot in a hurry, pouring mana into Master Horace’s golem to repair its legs and allow it to stand once more.

Then, Reggie’s knights repositioned themselves to keep the queen and her beast surrounded.

The queen only smiled. “So jaded, Reginald. You never let yourself get swept up in emotion; that’s something I always liked about you. You know, you might just be the person I hated least in all of Farzia. It’s almost a shame that I have to kill you.”

“You must not be worried if *that’s* what you’re thinking about right now. You stayed behind purely out of a desire to wipe out the Farzian royal family, I assume?” Reggie asked calmly. “You wanted to destroy Farzia, even if you had to give your life to achieve it. Why? Is that what the Kingdom of Llewynne ordered you to do?”

The queen erupted into laughter. Surely the thorns digging into her skin had to hurt, but her shoulders kept on shaking with mirth, as if she couldn’t even feel it.

I was taken aback. In the memories of the “first” Kiara—the ones I’d obtained via the Thorn Princess—the queen hadn’t been the type of person to have an outburst like this. What’s more, she was doing it when she was only seconds away from being murdered.

“Has she lost her mind?” Groul muttered. I couldn’t blame him.

“Oh, what a riot! You think I would dance to my brother’s tune? If I were such a feeble woman, I can assure you that you wouldn’t have faced such a struggle to get here!” Once her laughter had died down, she answered his question with a smile still fixed on her face. “You have one thing right: I despise the Farzian royal family. It was all because of a war against *Farzia* that my once-betrothed died and I was forced to marry into this miserable nation. As much as I wanted to relieve the king of his head right away, that wouldn’t have been enough to sate me. Hence, I bided my time and waited.”

Pitching her body forward, she screamed, “Farzia alone would never be enough! I want to see *everyone* laid to waste!”

The cry of her monster overlaid her own shout. As the beast rose back into the air, we prepared ourselves to fight it off. However, it was not *us* that the monster craned its neck toward. It was the queen.

“Huh?!”

In one swift motion, the monster swallowed the queen whole, thorns and all.

Even Reggie was left stunned by the sight of it. The queen was supposed to be the one in control of the beast. Why on earth had it gulped *her* down?

It wasn’t long before the monster began writhing in agony. Its gestures akin to someone retching painfully, it kicked its legs about and gave a violent flap of its wings.

As I backed away from the bizarre spectacle, Reggie glanced over his shoulder at me, as though he had just caught on to something. “Kiara, get ready to cast your magic!”

No sooner had he said that than the monster once again crashed against the balcony. What’s more, its transformation was nearly complete now. Its wounds were slowly fading away. Its missing beak had regenerated. Not only that, but its whole body appeared to be growing bigger, as though it were melting into the flames.

“Whoa Nelly, this isn’t good!” shouted Golem-Horace as he charged toward the beast. He tried to land a kick, only for the beast to handily sweep him aside with its wings.

The Thorn Princess retreated into the safety of the building, glowering at the monster. “I see... So the queen can use the magic of possession.”

“She what?!”

Surprised, I glanced over at the monster, only to see the queen’s

face emerging into view around its neck.

“My god, how horrifying,” one of the knights murmured.

If my voice had been working, I probably would have blurted out something similar. After all, it wasn’t just the contours of her face that had manifested there; it came complete with a mouth and eyes, and it had already begun to fully function as the queen’s face.

“My, my. This is my first time using it, so I wasn’t sure what was going to happen... but this will do nicely. Much better to leave *me* in charge of the maneuvers than this birdbrain,” said the queen’s face, clearly pleased with the outcome.

The bird sucked in a large gulp of air through its beak.

“Get away! She’s going to breathe fire!” Cain shouted.

I hurried to build a wall in front of everyone—but I wasn’t going to make it in time. The flames had already left the monster’s mouth.

“Whoaaa there!” Master Horace skidded forward, planting himself right in front of the beast. His efforts just barely managed to save us from taking a direct hit. Reynard blew snow to block the flames that licked past his golem’s body.

Once he’d seen that his knights were unharmed, Reggie commanded, “Do everything you can to keep her distracted, and leave the direct attacks to us! Kiara, go help Sir Horace!”

True enough, if Master Horace was down for the count, we weren’t going to make it through a second attack. Planning to buy time until I fixed him up, Reggie was approaching the beast with sword in hand.

When he saw how nervous I was about that, Cain—his sword still encrusted in Reynard’s ice—offered, “I’ll accompany His Highness!”

Cain followed after Reggie with Reynard in tow. The frostfox had used his ice magic to make the blade of his sword even longer. Seeing that, I knew I was safe to go focus on Master Horace for now.

“Are you okay, Master Horace?!”

“There must have been a boatload of mana packed into those flames. I’m melting a little, see?”

He wasn’t kidding. A chunk of the golem’s front half had melted away, leaving it as smooth as a slab of rock. I rushed to patch him up with some of the rubble lying around.

“How’s your real body holding up?”

“I used the golem’s hands to shield it.”

Master Horace was looking a little glossy where he sat atop the golem’s head. *Wait, is he melting too?!*

“I’ve got to do something!”

“There’s no time for that, little disciple.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Reggie and Cain. While they drew the beast’s attention with miniature bolts of lightning and the blade of

ice, the Thorn Princess plugged its mouth with her vines and weakened the force of its flames. Reynard canceled out whatever managed to slip by with his snowstorms.

Whenever it wasn't breathing fire, it instead shot flames from its wings, singing the two men and their fox. With nothing but low-powered attacks at our disposal, we couldn't manage anything more than stalling for time. Worse still, the monster had just taken to the air, presumably in preparation to cover an even wider range with its flames.

"Please, Master Horace, we need your help," I said.

At my request, Master Horace charged forward on his golem and grabbed the monster by the leg, knocking it off balance.

"Reggie!" I came up to his side and placed my hand on his shoulder. Inferring what I wanted him to do, he lifted his sword up high, once again striking the beast with a bolt of lightning bright enough to leave it blinded.

The monster's head went flying. While the beast itself didn't have the chance to so much as make a sound, the queen's countenance let out a shriek, her expression twisting in agony.

The rest of its body hit the balcony with a thud. Master Horace ducked out of the way to make sure he didn't end up pinned underneath it.

Blood gushed from the monster's neck, spraying toward the golem, those standing nearby, and even all the way back to me. Though we all managed to sidestep the spatter, I wasn't used to the thick stench of blood, and it almost was enough to make me gag.

"Is it over?" I heard Groul murmur.

The beast's head lay severed on the ground, so I had to assume we had dealt it a rather hefty blow. If her monster was dead, that meant we ought to have killed the queen possessing it, too.

"Keep your distance. Don't let your guard down just yet. There's no telling what tricks she might try next," the Thorn Princess advised, urging everyone to step away from the corpse.

Reggie followed her advice, and the rest of the soldiers backed off, too.

"Just to be sure, let's get in one last attack. Kiara—"

The moment Reggie called my name, the monster started thrashing in the pool of its own blood.

We backed away even farther. The monster, however, rose to its feet, plunging straight at Reggie. For a fleeting moment, the shock of it dulled everyone's senses.

"Reggie! Kiara!" the Thorn Princess cried, moving to wrap us up in her vines. I knew she wasn't going to make it in time, though.

Instead, I pushed Reggie out of the way to shield him, holding the

monster back by skewering it straight through. A wall of thorny vines blocked my vision a second too late, but they were swiftly burned away by the flames.

One of the enemy soldiers who I thought had died in the monster's first attack had gotten to his feet and cast his fire magic. When I looked over at the blood-soaked man, I knew something was wrong here.

"Why blood?"

I was so busy trying to think of an answer that I reacted a moment too late. The monster flapped its wings hard in one final act of resistance, showering me in blood.

The lukewarm sensation of it made me shudder. Only a moment later, however, the blood dissolved away into sand.

If that was the end of it, I would have thought it nothing more than what you'd expect a monstrous beast's last moments to be. But with the next breath I took, the blood-turned-sand crept inside my mouth.

"Hrk!" The overwhelming discomfort of it made me gag.

A broken laugh echoed from where the fallen monster lay. It was that of the queen who had fused with her beast.

"Oh, yes, you'll do nicely. Kill the man standing before you, the one most dear to you! Then spend what's left of your life suffering for it!"

"What are you talk—ggh?!"

Against my own will, my hand touched the floor. When I felt the mana draining from my body, I desperately tried to yank my arm away, but to no avail.

"No!"

I had no idea what kind of magic I was about to use. I did everything I could to try and curb the flow of mana within me. Unfortunately, just enough made it through for the spell to be cast, transforming a nearby spot of the stone floor into a spear. The moment it tore through the deep red carpet, aiming to pierce Reggie's leg, I felt my blood run cold.

Though Reggie made swift work of the spike with his lightning magic, my whole body suddenly felt like ice, and I couldn't stop the violent shivers that wracked my body.

"No... Why?"

"Kiara?" Reggie looked just as stunned as I felt, as though he couldn't believe what had just happened.

The one to answer him was the queen. "Spellcaster Kiara. Not only did you decline to become my pawn, but you've stood in my way for so very long. Now that I have control of you... why don't I give you a taste of despair by forcing you to kill the prince with your own

two hands?"

The moment she finished that sentence, I felt a terrible knot in my stomach, along with the suffocating sensation of something crawling inside my body.

"Oh, how I've waited for this day! With this, I can finally destroy Farzia. If I kill the prince, the country will be in no position to rebuild itself right away. No, it will wither away and die, slowly but surely chipped away by its neighbors. Taking away their spellcaster will make it even easier for that dream of mine to come true. Now then... relinquish this body to me."

I pitched forward as I listened to the queen, only for someone to rush up to catch me.

"Kiara!" I heard panic in the Thorn Princess's voice. "Everyone get away from Kiara!"

"Why?!"

"The queen used her possession magic on her! Do you want to die?!"

I heard Cain protest, but whoever it was who had caught me backed away.

That's right. I don't know how, but the queen is controlling me. That's why I cast my magic against my will. Possession, though? How? Earlier, the queen fed herself to her monster. I haven't done anything like that...

And that was when it hit me: it was the blood. The queen could manipulate her targets by using blood as the medium. That was why she'd had to feed herself to her bird in order to possess it. Because I'd gotten her blood in my mouth, the queen's influence had extended to me, too.

"Join your mana with mine, Kiara." Someone came forth and touched me—the Thorn Princess. "We became spellcasters using the same stone. The properties of our mana should be nearly identical. Take what I give you, alright?"

The Thorn Princess grasped my hand in hers, then poured her mana inside of me. The discomfort I'd felt, like a stone settled deep in my stomach, began to subside. It slowly but surely became easier to make the flow of my mana reflect my own will.

"We're going to force her out of you, Kiara," she said, and I nodded.

It was right then, however, that the monster crumbled away into sand. In the next moment, I was struck with light-headedness, and the sights and sounds before me seemed to fade into the distance. It was almost like everything was on a television, and I was watching it a little ways away in a pitch-black room.

"Out of my way!" came a voice from my own body, and I watched myself thrust the Thorn Princess aside. I saw myself preparing to cast

a spell on her, too.

I tried to stop it from happening, but it was hard to control my own mana—almost like I was trying to push my way forward on the floor of a deep lake.

Perhaps I'd succeeded at delaying the attack on the Thorn Princess, though. She managed to dodge the stone spear, then Cain stepped in to defend her. *Thank God.*

Of course, my magic didn't stop there. Next, I summoned a golem the size of a person, only to send it charging toward Cain and the Thorn Princess.

No! Stop! I wanted to scream with all my might. I was desperate to make it stop, but there was nothing I could do. The queen's mind had taken complete control of my body, and my mana would barely obey my own will anymore.

My golem landed a hit on Cain and sent him flying. He landed on his back and didn't get back up again.

Groul, who had stepped up to shield Reggie, couldn't hope to make a dent in the stone golem with nothing but his sword. To make matters worse, the golem transformed its hand into a drill, piercing him through the shoulder. The soldiers trying to cover for Groul were knocked away one after the other, too.

Reggie ordered his men to fall back, taking a step forward himself—only to have his arm ripped apart for his troubles. It was too much. I wanted nothing more than to cover my eyes, but I wasn't allowed even that.

The only part of me I could still control was my voice. "Stop! Get away from me, please!"

I knew the reason why my voice was working, though. The queen was hoping it would elicit sympathy from my friends, making them even more determined to bring me back.

Seeing as the queen had aborted my magic, my original golem had turned to sand, and Master Horace was flapping his limbs wildly in its remains. I couldn't look to him for help. Reggie and the Thorn Princess, our only two magic users, tried to hold my golem back, but the difference in the strength of our magic had put them completely on the defensive.

Reynard managed to stall my golem for a time, but he seemed to have completely lost his bearings.

Fall into despair and surrender this body to me. While I was wracked with anxiety over everyone's predicament, the queen's soul whispered into my mind. *Kill them now. Put an end to the bloodline of Farzia, which robbed me of everything I had.*

As I felt what could only be described as the queen attaching her soul to mine, memories of her despair flooded into my mind.



It was an old war with Farzia—if I had to guess, the same one in which Cain had lost his family. Marianne's fiancé had left for the front alongside her second older brother.

Unfortunately, that was all part of a scheme devised by her eldest brother, who had only just ascended to the Llewynian throne. He wanted to eliminate the second prince, who was so widely adored as to pose a real threat to his position.

The second prince perished on the battlefield, just as the king had willed it. Her fiancé came home alive, though he hadn't escaped the fight unscathed. However, he was soon sentenced to death for his role in Llewyn's defeat.

Marianne had objected. Hearing her pleas, the king had presented her with a choice: in exchange for her fiancé's life, she could be married off to Farzia as a hostage masquerading as a queen.

She chose to marry into Farzia. Tragically, that had all been another part of the king's plan.

Marianne had been the daughter of the late king's second wife, and thus had some rather influential noblemen backing her. The newly crowned king was afraid of the clout she held. Thus, he believed that if he shipped her off to a neighboring country, no matter how poorly he ruled, any nobles who might have pushed for Marianne to take the throne would give up that stance, leaving them no choice but to keep supporting him.

Furthermore, it meant no one would be around to make a fuss when he executed her fiancé, the very condition of their deal.

A few years later, Marianne—who had now become the queen of Farzia—heard the rumors that her once-betrothed had been killed... and fell into despair.

It was then that she came up with the idea to use the war not only to destroy Farzia—but to bring Llewyn down with it.



The memories must have been passed along to me because the queen was possessing my body.

If Reggie was doomed to be executed as part of someone's scheme, and I was offered a way to save him from that, I probably would have done the same thing. Still, that didn't justify invading and putting the people of Farzia through hell.

Seeing that I hadn't stopped putting up a fight, the queen changed tactics in her efforts to get to me.

What's the point of struggling? You already attacked the prince. It's too late now. You ought to know better than anyone that he isn't the type

to show mercy to his enemies. He'll never forgive you.

I swallowed hard. For a fleeting moment, my mind went totally blank—which gave the queen the opportunity to dive deeper into my mind and assert an even stronger control over me. She did everything in her power to etch the command “Kill” upon my subconscious.

It pained me that she was slowly but surely corrupting me into *wanting* to do that. But needless to say, killing Reggie was the one thing I could never, ever do. It was the one choice I could never make. Even if it meant I had to die, all I wanted was for him to live.

Even in the memories of my first reincarnation that the Thorn Princess had bestowed upon me, I'd only ever wanted him to live. Hence his death had left me near-suicidal.

“Get rid of... the queen...”

We had to kill her. Things weren't looking good for us, though. My magic was preventing the Thorn Princess and everyone else from getting anywhere near me.

The least I could do was try to cut off the flow of my mana to keep the queen from casting any more magic—and it was during these attempts that I noticed something. If I tried to take control of my mana in the same direction the queen was willing it, I would lose out. But if I tried focusing it elsewhere, I could still set my magic in motion.

“I won't let you die ever again.” Those were *my* words spilling from my mouth. I took a deep breath, sucked in my gut, and severed a certain segment of my mana flow.

There came a harsh, muffled cry. “Agh!”

Though the moan had left my own lips, I couldn't tell whether it had been mine or the queen's. All I knew was that everything hurt.

I lifted my arms, which had no strength left in them. When the queen saw them bend back at an impossible angle, she let out a shriek.

My stunt had robbed the queen of her perfect control over my magic. Though she tried pressing my broken arm to the floor, my obstruction of our mana flow was making it difficult for her to cast any spells. She hadn't fully become *me* yet, after all. It was hard for her to wield my magic with a fractured arm.

The golem under her control had likewise stopped moving, and now it was just standing there vacantly. It was taking everything the queen had just to keep it from falling apart.

My friends must have realized what I had done. After spending a few moments staring in wide-eyed astonishment, they went on the offensive. The Thorn Princess restrained the golem, and the knights thrust their blades into it over and over in an attempt to destroy it.

Unfortunately, that wasn't quite enough.

“Let me put an end to this...”

Now that the queen had been distracted by the pain and the shock over my choice to mutilate myself, this was my one and only chance. I morphed a stone beside me into a sword, only to thrust it toward my own heart.

“Kiara, no!” Reggie rushed over to me, his face twisted in an anguish the likes of which I had never seen before. That was all I needed to see to know that he was still worried about me—and to be at peace.

“That’s more than enough for me.”

It’s nowhere near enough! We’re going to bring Farzia down! Llewyrne, too! the queen screamed inside me.

Repressing the urge I felt to go berserk, I ran the blade through my chest. Oddly enough, I didn’t feel any pain. Perhaps the queen had already seized too much control of my body from me.

I could feel the queen howling. She was in so much pain. Terrified when I failed to draw my next breath, it was all I could do to keep a lid on my panic.

I couldn’t hear anyone else’s voices anymore. My vision was getting dark... but just as I’d found myself trapped inside a pitch-black void, I saw someone slump down right before me. It was the queen.

Why? Why would you choose to die?

Based on what she was saying, I had to assume the blow had been a fatal one.

I was so close to destroying both Farzia and Llewyrne! It’s all your fault I failed.

Despite her grievances, the queen could do little else but shed tears with a look of utter defeat. I didn’t need to hear her say the reason to understand why.

The queen had lived solely for this moment. She had even learned magic in preparation for when a war broke out, all so she could lay waste to the homeland that had killed her fiancé.

Evidently, she had become a spellcaster by sharing a contract stone with her beast. She had encouraged Lord Credias to conduct experiments to that end, sacrificing dozens of people in the process. As the price, the queen was unable to cast her magic on anyone without using the monster’s blood as a medium.

That explained why she had waited here for us to arrive.

Once the monster’s blood had entered my system, the queen gained the ability to possess me. So long as she couldn’t exercise complete control over me, however, her spell would remain incomplete, and she would inevitably disappear.

The figure of the queen sitting before me was slowly but surely beginning to fade away.

I just wanted to get my revenge. I thought a world without him in it deserved to fall to ruin.

I could understand how she felt. Back before I had my past-life memories, I had been inconsolable to the point that I couldn't have cared less about anything or anyone else. It was so bad that I had even attacked that which Reggie held dear, just because it was what I'd been ordered to do.

During the first loop, I had stood by and watched Cain die, and by the time I had finally killed Lord Credias, my heart had been left completely empty. The best thing I had felt I could do was let Alan kill me, bearing all his hatred in the process.

I had been weak. It wasn't as though I'd had no possible means to resist, but I'd been too scared to turn against my tormentor. As soon as Reggie had walked into my life, I'd formed a dependency on him. I couldn't even make up my mind to die without him around to guide me.

But I was different now.

"You knew what you wanted to do, and you saw it through to the end," I said, and the queen lifted her head to look at me, confused. Surely she had never dreamed I would *approve* of what she had done. "Sadly, you chose a path that would only make you weaker."

This wasn't what the queen should have done to make her dream come true.

"You should have killed the king of Llewynne with your own two hands to protect your fiancé. You should have fought alongside the man you loved and made the country your own. If you'd only done that, he might still be alive today."

She may very well have failed. Still, so long as she didn't shy away from the fight, it would have remained a possibility. If she was prepared to destroy a country for her own selfish desires, she should have been willing to do at least that much.

Ugh... The queen covered her face, bursting into tears. *But... that's not fair...*

"I know. You didn't think it was an option. We who live in this world are so used to following orders, sometimes we forget what we can accomplish with our own two hands."

My own rebellion had been a product of the past-life memories stirred up within me. It was all because I'd had memories of a world where I was free, where it was all up to me whether I listened to someone or not. Seeing as the queen had been raised to be married off wherever she was told, she had thought it only natural to obey the order to be wed—all the more so if it was an easy way to save her fiancé's life.

So I wasn't able to save him because I got married? I... should have

just killed my brother?

"The reason *I* couldn't protect Reggie the first time around was because I was just waiting around for someone to rescue me."

I had always hated the queen for ordering his death. Yet it was just as true that *I* hadn't bothered to fight for him when there was always the chance that I could have saved his life.

"Llewyne will fall sooner or later, so it's okay for you to rest now. Your enemies are no more. You've as good as achieved your goal."

Achieving my goal won't bring him back. I knew that, deep down. I just didn't want to acknowledge it. The queen lowered her hands and stared up at me. *But you were given a second chance, I see. I'm so envious.*

The queen's feelings toward me were complicated. Amid all the irrevocable bitterness was the deep relief of having met someone who understood her. Nevertheless, she still resented that *I* had been able to start over, which was enough to spur her to reach a hand toward me.

If I can at least take you down with me, perhaps it will be easier to resign myself to my fate.

I got that the queen was trying to gain a sense of fulfillment by bringing me down with her. *I* was the one responsible for ruining her plan. If it hadn't been for me, she would have been able to kill Reggie back in Évrard with ease.

Of course, I was bound to perish alongside her either way.

"*I did stab myself through the heart. I doubt a salve would be enough to fix that.*"

While I knew I was going to die, for some odd reason, I had no regrets. Perhaps it was because I knew there was nothing left to be done for me.

"Besides, I did what I wanted to do."

I had kept Reggie alive through the war. I had led Farzia to victory. Both of my wishes had come true. Thus, when the queen extended a hand toward me, I didn't try to avoid it.

That was when the Thorn Princess appeared, grabbing the queen's shoulders from behind. "I won't let you die, Kiara."

Huh? Why is the Thorn Princess here? While I was wondering that, the queen started turning to stone where the silver-haired spellcaster had grabbed her, crumbling away and disappearing into nothing.

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp rush of pain.

"Ow!"

The pain was intense enough to steal my breath away—and it was only then that I realized I was still breathing at all. I was surprised to find I could hear people's voices, too.

"Can you hear me, Kiara? Just hang in there," the Thorn Princess said, her voice laced with pain.

“Thorn Princess...?”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stop things from coming to this. I’ve reached the limits of my power to go back into the past. As a result, I never managed to see what was bound to transpire here.”

That explained why the Thorn Princess hadn’t warned me about what the queen was going to do. Like she had said before, all she knew was how Alan had died.

An agonized groan left my lips as the throbbing grew even worse. “Agh!”

It was the pain of having my chest impaled, which I hadn’t been able to feel just moments ago. It ached. It was excruciating. My eyes instinctively filled with tears, and I could hear myself screaming.

“Kiara!” I heard Reggie’s voice, too. For a moment, I thought I was just hallucinating, but I soon caught sight of him peering into my face.

“Reggie... NOOOO!” I couldn’t help but screech at the torment, a sensation almost akin to my wound being ripped open anew.

“Bear with it, Kiara! The Thorn Princess said that she’s going to heal you!”

“Heal... me?”

When had she learned to use that kind of magic? Did that mean she could wield earth magic, just like me?

“When I consumed my second contract stone, I gained just a touch of earth magic. It was only thanks to you that I learned I could use it to heal, however.”

While I listened to the Thorn Princess’s explanation, I writhed my way through the occasional bout of pain that assailed me. Reggie had his arms wrapped around me to keep me from lashing out, while the Thorn Princess clutched me tight and cast her spell.

Gradually, more and more of my surroundings came back into focus. Cain was standing beside the Thorn Princess, keeping a careful eye on my wound. I was relieved to see that he had made it through the fight okay.

I saw Groul there, pressing a hand to his punctured shoulder, and Felix alongside him. I assumed that meant he had taken care of all the enemies outside.

Of course, there was the Thorn Princess, too. As she pressed her hand against where my wound must have been, I noticed something was off about her. Something spilled from her shoulder with a faint rustling sound. More and more people were starting to gather around me now, but none of them had noticed what was going on with her.

It was hard to tell what it was at first, what with the way my vision had blurred from the pain. However, as my breathing stabilized, I finally put two and two together.

“Wha...? Thorn... Princess...”

It was her hair. Her hair was dissolving into sand bit by bit.

Oh no! Is her mana running out of control?!

She had said something curious earlier, too—that she had lost her power to go back into the past. Did that mean she had run out of mana? That she couldn’t wield her magic anymore? Yet here she was, casting a spell in spite of that. There was only one way this was going to end.

“Don’t do it...”

“Quiet, Kiara. I’ve almost got you.”

At this rate, the Thorn Princess was going to die. I was in too much pain to keep talking, though. Had I put Cain and Felix through this kind of agony when I healed them, too?

“No! You’re turning... to sand...”

It was only once I finally managed to get those words out that, with a start, Reggie finally noticed the change in the Thorn Princess. “What?! You’re on the verge of disintegrating yourself!”

“Don’t try to stop me! If I were to quit now, Kiara would die. I’m... not very good at using this kind of magic. The wound would open up instantly. I need more time.”

The Thorn Princess chewed hard on her lip. Meanwhile, her hair was getting shorter and shorter by the second.

“Look at your hands! You need to stop now!” Cain shouted, alerting me to the fact that the Thorn Princess’s hands had now begun the transformation into sand.

“It’s too late. The only one who could cure me of this is Kiara. Even after I’ve finished healing her, however, she will be far from peak condition. Trying to mend *me* would be enough to kill her,” asserted the Thorn Princess. Though there was grief in her tone, she sounded no less firm for it.

“But... why?”

Why would you do this? I thought. *You still haven’t had a proper conversation with Reggie as mother and son!*

“It’s quite alright. I came here prepared to die. I’m happy to give my life for you, Kiara.” The Thorn Princess smiled at me, clearly holding back tears. “You granted me my wish. For so long, I failed to find a future where I didn’t lose my child—even after I tried over and over again, enough times to throw me into despair. I pushed my desires onto you, awakened the memories sleeping within you without your consent, and put you through so many painful experiences. It’s about time I paid you back for everything you’ve done.”

“You don’t have to pay me back! I wanted to save Reggie, too. You didn’t force me to do anything!”

Now that I could finally move a little, I instinctively reached out

to grab the Thorn Princess's arm. It wasn't too late. If I healed her hands now and brought her mana back under control, she wouldn't have to die.

"Your Highness, if you don't want Kiara to die, I suggest you make her stop. We're going to go down together if she keeps this up."

Though it was with a brief moment's hesitation, Reggie reached out and caught me by the arm.

"No, don't go! You still haven't told him! Are you planning to die without saying anything, Linessa?!"

Reggie, Cain, and the rest of the knights all gasped.

That ought to have clued them in to the truth—that the Thorn Princess was Reggie's mother. The prince loosened his grip on my hand. Seeing as I had recovered enough to move around, I took that chance to reach for the Thorn Princess.

Cain rushed over, and together he and Reggie pinned my arms back once more.

"Are you really going to put me through the pain of losing my family all over again?"

"Oh, Sir Cain..."

When he put it like that, I couldn't very well protest. I stopped struggling against their hold, only to watch the Thorn Princess's arm gradually disintegrate into sand before my very eyes. Her hair had nearly been shortened to a bob, and she couldn't use her right hand anymore, but she kept her left pressed to my wound, persisting in stitching me back together.

By the time *that* hand started crumbling away, she had finally finished healing me. She straightened up from her hunched position, then turned to Reggie—who had been watching this unfold in silence—and smiled.

"You can ask Kiara for the details later. I did my best to fix her up, but it was my first time trying this kind of spell, so I might not have done a very good job. Let her rest for a good, long while. Try not to move her around much until she's well enough to do her own healing."

"Thorn Princess, I..."

Considering he had only just learned she was his mother when he heard me shout her name, Reggie looked like he had no idea what to do.

The Thorn Princess only gave him that piece of professional advice before turning her gaze back to me, her expression gentle. "I'm glad you were here, Kiara. I'm glad... that I met someone who knew of another world. I've done what I set out to do. I don't want to leave with any regrets, so don't be too sad over me, okay?" she said, a look of satisfaction on her face.

She then addressed Reggie once more. “I couldn’t tell you before, but I’m glad I can say it now. I know we’ll never see each other again, but take care of yourself, Reggie. My... beloved, one and only son. I hope you find happiness. Farewe—”

She dissolved into sand before she could finish saying goodbye.

Reggie swallowed hard. Unfortunately, it was too late for him to say anything back. The knights all hung their heads, too.

But me? I refused to give up. Now that I could finally reach out for her, I ran my fingers through the sand that had once made up the Thorn Princess’s body. I was going to do everything I could for her before I passed out.

When he realized what I was doing, Cain tried to stop me. “Don’t overexert yourself, Miss Kiara!”

“I’ll be fine. As much as I hate to admit it, I can’t bring her back to life. But there’s something else I *can* do.”

I wasn’t about to throw my life away after the Thorn Princess had handed it back to me. Still, I wanted to keep her around a bit longer, in whatever form I could. As it turned out, I simply didn’t have it in me to sit back like a good little girl and watch her go.

The Thorn Princess had assured me that she was going to tell Reggie the truth later on, yet she had come to this fight planning to die. If I hadn’t blurted out her name, she probably would have died without saying anything at all. *The nerve of her, really!*

“Sorry, but I’m going to need you to stick around just a little longer. I won’t let you go without saying a word.”

I knew I was being selfish. There was a good chance she was going to be angry with me for this.

“But Kiara, you’re in no shape to—”

It was Master Horace who shut down Reggie’s objection. “No, she can handle this much.” He gazed down at me from where he sat in a soldier’s arms. “I know what you’re planning to do. Considering you pulled it off right after your spellcaster transformation, I don’t see why it would be a problem here. You’re right that this lady still has a lot of explaining to do. Not to mention she hasn’t had nearly enough time to chat with that prince over there.”

Having figured out what I had in mind, Master Horace was giving me the push I needed.

“Thanks, Master Horace.”

I cast my magic. And then...

“EXCUUUUSE ME?!”

Just as her scream echoed throughout the throne room of the royal palace, the stage of our battle that had only just come to an end... I faded out of consciousness.

Final Chapter: A New Beginning

The next time I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was a grid of tiles patterned with pale green trees. After I'd spent a few, long moments staring up in a daze, I finally realized it was some kind of ceiling.

"It's a ceiling... or is it?"

My throat was so raw that my voice cracked as I spoke. I needed to drink some water.

For the moment, I closed my mouth and glanced around. I soon discovered that it was the canopy of a bed I had been gazing up at, the sheer curtains drawn around me.

It looked like a pretty expensive place to sleep. The bedding was soft, too. It was airy but still plenty warm—not to mention ten times fluffier than the straw-filled mattresses I always slept on during our travels.

"Is this down?"

Why was I sleeping on such a luxurious bed? Thinking back on the events soon led me to the answer.

"Oh, right. This is the royal palace."

Whether we were on the heels of a war, or whether enemy soldiers had occupied the estate, there was bound to be a bed set or two left behind, and the beds themselves obviously wouldn't be going anywhere. We must have commandeered one of them after I passed out. The room was quiet, and through the curtains, I could see there was a jug of water and a glass left out nearby.

That meant all the fighting had come to an end. Only after we had driven all the enemy soldiers out of the castle and removed the Llewynians from the royal capital would it have been safe to leave me alone like this.

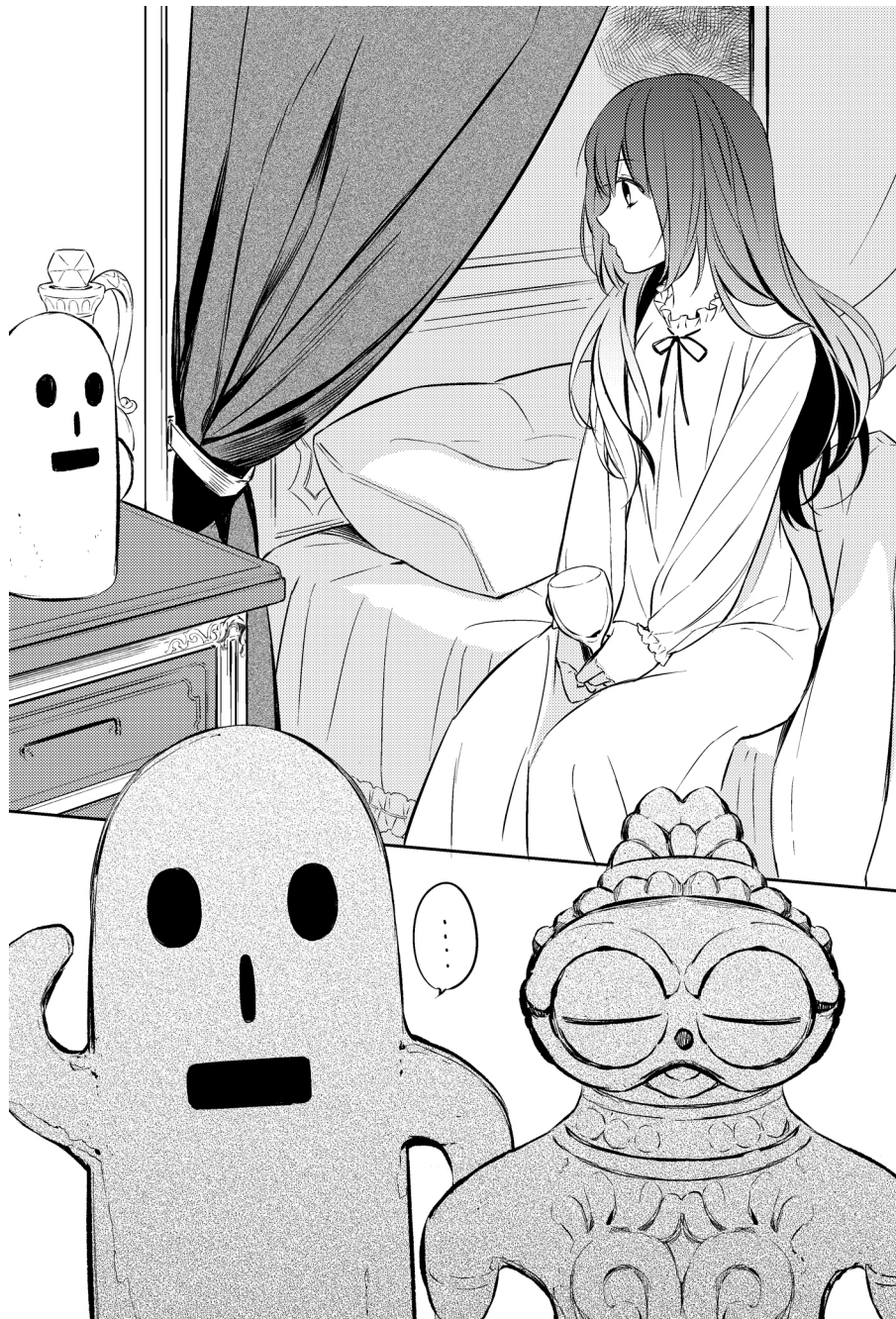
I sat up, planning to help myself to some water before worrying about anything else. My voice was way too hoarse to call for anyone at the moment.

I felt a tiny pang in my chest as I pulled myself upright. Just as the Thorn Princess had warned me, I hadn't made a full recovery yet. She had advised me to heal the rest of it myself, so that was probably the best plan of action.

I gathered up the veil and pulled it off to the side. When I reached out to grab the jug on the nightstand beside the bed, I finally noticed

what else was sitting there.

Next to the clay body of Master Horace was another small, ocher figurine with a featureless face and a simple design. Its right hand was positioned near its head, while its left hand hung by its waist. There was no mistaking it: it was a Kofun-style clay figurine.



Hm.

Putting that aside, I grabbed the glass, poured myself some water from the jug, and drained the cup. When I set the glass back down with a big, refreshed sigh, someone spoke up.

“So you’re finally awake. I’ve been waiting for this moment, Kiara.” That stock villain line had come from the other figurine. Vibrating in indignation, it shouted, “Why did you bring me back after everything was finally over?! It would be one thing if you’d revived me in my original body—but what is THIS?! What were you thinking, sticking me inside such an outlandish doll?! *Kiaraaaaa!*”

I was so relieved to hear the Thorn Princess alive and well that I couldn’t help breaking into a smile. “Oh, good. You’re nowhere near as angry as I expected.”

“Excuse me?! How, pray tell, do I not sound angry to you?! Don’t tell me you’re still dreaming!” huffed the clay Thorn Princess, flapping her limbs about as she did.

The final spell I had cast was to imprison her soul in a clay figurine, just like I had with Master Horace. There was no getting back her body now that it had crumbled to nothing, but I’d thought this would be an acceptable alternative.

For the record, the reason I’d gone with this particular design was because, well... nothing better had popped to mind when I tried to envision “an earthen doll.” All I really wanted was for her to have a chat with Reggie anyway, so I figured this form would do in the interim. And hey, it made her a matching set with Master Horace, too.

I was glad to see I had pulled it off without a hitch. Besides, no matter how loudly she screamed at me, it didn’t seem like the Thorn Princess was *genuinely* angry with me.

“If you were really that mad, I figure you would have just slapped me awake. And you *definitely* wouldn’t have waited for me to finish drinking my water.”

That comment got the Thorn Princess’s other figurine to slump forward, pressing both of her hands on the table. “My lord, it’s like talking to a wall...”

Next came Master Horace’s cackle. “After waiting three whole days to air your grievances, it’s no wonder a reaction like that would get you down! Eeeheehee!”

Apparently, three days had gone by since I passed out.

“Wh-What an infuriating person you are! The disciple took after the master, I see!”

“You’re better off just letting it go. Being stuck in a body like this doesn’t change much. All I wanted was to live a quiet life, and *you* had already renounced the world. You might as well take the opportunity

to watch over your kid's future, sticking your nose in his business enough to make up for all the fussing you haven't been able to do."

"Ugh..." The Thorn Princess swallowed the complaint on the tip of her tongue.

"Something tells me that deep down, you were glad for the chance to sit down and talk with the prince. How about it? Eh?"

"Gggh..." Despite her mortified groaning, she gave a reluctant nod of her head. "Of course I was... I was never able to say a proper goodbye to him. I had so many things to tell him."

Judging by that reply, the Thorn Princess had already had an opportunity to talk to Reggie.

"Thanks for sitting down and talking with Reggie. He thought you had abandoned him for so long. I bet it took a load off his mind to know that you'd been watching over him and working to save him this whole time."

"Nnngh..." She went back to whimpering. "Like mentor, like disciple—you both know just what to say to make a woman feel guilty. A truly loathsome pair."

"Erm, if you really hate it that much, I can dispel the magic whenever you like. Just ask me and I'll do it."

It sounded like she'd already spoken to Reggie, and she seemed satisfied with how the conversation had gone, so maybe she really was ready to go. Thus, I offered her an out in case she wanted to pass on rather than hang on to life as a clay doll.

That'd be fair. It's a funny look, but I don't know if I'd call it "cute" at first glance. It's probably better if the vessel matches the tastes of the one inside it, anyway.

"I'm... fine for now," came the Thorn Princess's mumbled response.

I couldn't stop myself from cracking a grin. That could only mean that she wanted to stay by Reggie's side a little bit longer.

With a delighted cackle, Master Horace rang a bell sitting atop the nightstand. Following that relatively loud clang, a woman came in from just outside the door. Judging by her dark livery, she must have been one of the servants left behind in the royal palace.

Though she seemed somewhat daunted by the two clay figurines, she heard out Master Horace's request and left the room to prepare me a meal.

Well, I say "meal," but considering I'd been asleep for three days, she didn't bring anything too extravagant. I ate some soup and a soft piece of bread. Once I'd had some time to digest, a handful of people entered the room.

"How are you holding up, Kiara?!"

"Are you feeling alright?"

Gina and Girsch burst in, followed by Cain. The three frostfoxes trailed in after them, too.

Oh, Lila shrank back to normal! That's great. Now you don't have to worry about getting kicked out of the house, huh? I'm sure she can handle the cold of the winter just fine, but it would've been sad if she had to be the odd one out.

Reynard was giving off vibes of *I just got dragged along for the ride*, seemingly more interested in the room than in me. Panting excitedly all the while, he went around sniffing at the walls and the legs of the chairs. Sara trailed after him with an air of nonchalance.

Sitting up in my bed, I told my visitors, "My chest hurts a little, but I'm fine otherwise."

My mana had settled down, too, so I was sure I was going to be fine.

When he heard that, Cain looked immensely relieved. "Please don't try anything like that again; it was terrible for my heart. I realize you didn't have much of a choice, but I was horribly worried for you." He came to my bedside and gave me a pat on the head. "If you were to die, I'd have to take responsibility as your bodyguard and follow after you. Remember that."

That was some awfully heavy rationale he'd slipped into his scolding.

"Uh... Right. It won't happen again."

I was about to add, *As long as it's not a life-or-death situation*, but I rethought that one and simply nodded instead.

"Aw, but every girl has those moments where she wants to do something a little crazy," Girsch chimed in, offering a peculiar sort of understanding. I couldn't help giggling.

"By the way, would you mind telling me what happened while I was out cold?"

We had spent so much time talking about the Thorn Princess's clay doll situation that I still had no clue what else was going on.

Girsch was happy to oblige my request. According to the mercenary, we had cleared the castle of all enemies. All our foes in the royal capital had either been apprehended or slain.

"I'm betting it will take another week or so before things settle down in the capital. The Salekhardian troops are supposed to stick around for a little longer after that, too."

"Oh! Did Isaac and his men make it out okay?"

"Please, that king is perfectly capable of fending for himself! It helps that he doesn't have a reason to die anymore, either," said Girsch, dropping that blithely cruel comment with a laugh. Gina giggled at the joke herself, so I figured this was just the poor guy's lot in life.

“How much damage did the Farzian troops take?”

“They had a tough time after you left to infiltrate the palace,” Gina answered. “The monster didn’t show its face again, but there were a lot of defective spellcasters. We opted to surround them rather than run at them blindly, so it took a while to wrap things up.”

One more person entered the room in the middle of our conversation.

“How are you feeling, Kiara?”

It was Reggie. Just seeing his face put me at ease.

Though he was back home in the royal palace, he was still dressed for war. His armor was the only part of his uniform he had removed, and he still had his sword hanging from his waist.

When my eyes met with his pale blue ones, the reality of the situation finally sank in. *I’m really alive. And Reggie is here with me.*

“Sorry for causing so much trouble. I’m all better now, though.”

“I see... That’s good to hear.”

Reggie came up beside my bed, only to give a wordless stroke of my hair. All he did was gaze silently at me, and the strangest part was that I could somehow pick up on exactly what he was trying to convey.

“We just came to see how you were doing. Looks like you have a little more color in your cheeks now. Good,” said Alan, who had come along with Reggie. He got close enough to take a quick look at my face, then backed off again.

“Thanks for taking care of the fight in the royal capital, Alan. I’d heard you took your fair share of damage, but I’m glad to see you’re doing alright.”

“It was to be expected, really. We weren’t going to get off without taking somewhat of a beating,” he responded. He then made to leave the room, having barely said anything at all. “Well, I’m satisfied to see you alive and well. I have a lot of work to do, so let’s catch up later.”

He called on Gina, Girsch, and Cain to accompany him. Gina took Master Horace and the clay version of the Thorn Princess with her as she left.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me, Your Majesty,” said Groul, who had accompanied Reggie here. “We will be holding a meeting shortly, so I shall see you there.” He stepped out of the room as well, ushering the servant lady out as he went.

Reggie and I were the only ones left in the room. It didn’t take long for me to figure out that everyone was trying to give us some alone time.

“Kiara,” Reggie murmured softly, sitting on the edge of my bed and wrapping me up in a gentle hug.

He just stayed like that for a good, long while—almost as if he

had too many things to say and he was trying to decide where to start.

Finally, he opened his mouth to speak. "I'm so glad you didn't die. When I had to watch you stab yourself, I didn't know what I was going to do."

"I know. Sorry."

I knew I had worried him, so I just kept my mouth shut and nodded. Yet Reggie only responded by pulling back and—for reasons that escaped me—reaching out to pinch my nose.

"Ngh?!"

"Don't say things you don't mean. I just knew you were going to do this, you know—that you'd apologize or offer some platitudes about how you wouldn't let yourself die, only to brush it under the rug and act like it never happened."

"Bwut I—!"

Ugh, my voice is coming out all weird now!

"I realize that you felt you had no choice, given the situation. It was the best way to stop the queen. The Thorn Princess... rather, Mother said that although she can use the magic of possession, she's not skilled enough to exert much control over a living target, so we wouldn't have been able to get rid of the queen without you nearly killing yourself."

"I'b weally soww—"

Gah! I want to apologize, but I can't even talk properly!

"I can't tawk like dis, Reggie!" I protested, grabbing him by the wrist in the hopes that he would let go. Unfortunately, it just happened to be his right arm.

"Tch..." He grimaced, reflexively taking his hand off my nose.

Oh, crap. His right arm was injured. Even worse, I'm the one who did it to him—even if the queen was possessing me at the time.

"I can heal—"

"No. You're banned from using magic for the foreseeable future."

He made another grab for my nose. When I lifted my arm to shield my face, pain seared through my wound. "Ouch!"

"Are you alright?!" Reggie fretted as I clamped a hand over my lower chest.

"It just hurts a little, that's all. Once I've recovered my strength, I can heal the rest myself."

"I see. Regardless, Mother is right; you shouldn't be using any magic until you've gotten some rest. Winter is coming, in any case. No one is going to keep on fighting through sleet and snow, so we won't have to worry about getting attacked in the meantime."

I noticed something in his words. "Oh, you're calling the Thorn Princess 'Mother' now. Did you two talk a little?"

"Yes. My knights made some time for us to sit down together...

right after you collapsed, actually.”

That was good to hear.

“I had no idea she was still alive, so it took me by surprise. She told me that if you hadn’t yelled out her name when you did, she was planning to fade away without uttering a word on the matter.”

“I knew it.”

I’d only said her name in the heat of the moment, but I was glad that I had. If I hadn’t turned her into a clay figurine, Reggie never would have had the chance to talk with his mother, and trying to explain everything after the fact would have left me in a very awkward position.

Reggie was clearly pleased with the outcome, too. I could see his features had softened.

“Oh, and Sir Groul called you ‘Your Majesty,’ didn’t he? Does that mean you’ve already taken the throne?”

Reggie nodded. “I made the proclamation as soon as the battle came to an end. My coronation will have to be on the smaller side, but I plan to get it over with next week. Seeing as these were far from the typical circumstances for a king’s demise, there won’t be anyone to keep the country running otherwise.”

If the king had passed away normally, the people serving under him could have governed until a new ruler was crowned. Unfortunately, the vassals of the royal family had largely been killed or sent away themselves, and few to none remained in the royal palace.

Reggie had to take up the reins of Farzia as soon as possible. We still had to reward all the territories who had joined the war effort, not to mention send aid to the regions that had suffered damage. First and foremost, however, we had to reconstruct the royal capital. Reggie barely had a spare moment to breathe.

I was worried about how he was going to handle all that, considering he was still injured, but he claimed he would be fine. “I know which vassals have fled to the nearby provinces and how long it would take them to rush over here. I’ve moved Aunt Beatrice out from Sestina as well, so she should be here to help us for a while. I have plenty of options.”

From the sound of it, the king had entrusted Reggie with quite a bit of work in the past, so it wasn’t as though he was going to have to learn everything from scratch. Above all else, if Reggie believed he could pull it off, I knew he was going to be just fine.

While relief washed over me, he went on, “That said, I plan to hold a much grander ceremony in the spring.”

“In the spring? What, are you going to summon a bunch more people and hold a second coronation?”

Does he have to hold it twice for some political reason? I wondered, giving a puzzled tilt of my head.

Reggie laughed. "I don't mean a coronation, Kiara." He grabbed me gently by the wrist, pulling me closer. Then, he clarified, "I want to marry you."

That was the last thing I expected to hear, and I let out a surprised gasp.

I knew our feelings were mutual, and he'd implied things to that effect before. Still, I hadn't expected him to actually pop the question until things had calmed down a little. Were things ever *truly* going to "calm down," though?

Nevertheless, I was ecstatic. With each passing second, more and more joy welled up within me.

"It *does* mean I'll be burdening you with the title of 'queen'... but even so, I want you to stay with me forever. I want you to be mine. Is that alright?"

As self-conscious as it made me to be asked that question point-blank, I nodded. "Erm, but I'm not sure if I'll make a very good queen. I'm also worried about whether my status will be an issue."

Legally, I was the daughter of a relative of Évrard's margrave. Hardly a proper aristocrat. I'd expressed this concern to other people before, but I wanted to hear some assurance from the man himself.

Evidently, he didn't see it as an issue at all. "If you're that worried, we can ask Aunt Beatrice to adopt you. That said, you're the spellcaster who led our troops to victory. Seeing as your credentials go far beyond a mere title, I doubt anyone would claim you aren't fit to be queen."

He reached out to brush his fingers against my cheek. "I'm not about to tell you that it *won't* be a heavy responsibility. If you bring Mother along with you, however, she'll tell you everything you need to know about how to conduct yourself. For anything else that troubles you, you can simply shut them up with your title of spellcaster and a show of power to back it up."

With that radical declaration of his, Reggie brought his face close to mine. He softly kissed my cheek, then whispered in my ear, "Well, what's your answer?"

"Yes. I want to stay by your side... forever."

No sooner had I answered than Reggie sealed my mouth with his. His lips felt cool against mine as I took in the warm sigh of his breath. The first time we'd kissed, embarrassment had been the strongest thing I felt, but after doing it so many times now, it had gradually come to feel completely natural to me.

It was just like holding hands. The first time we'd done it, I thought my head was going to explode, but it was amazing what sort

of things you could get used to. By the time my mind had started wandering to the very first time we'd entwined our hands together, Reggie pulled his face away from mine.

"I'm glad you didn't turn me down."

"Why, were you worried? It wasn't the first time you've brought it up."

Reggie had made all sorts of comments that could only work under the assumption that we were going to be married one day. I was pretty sure the only reason he hadn't straight-up proposed earlier was because he hadn't known what would happen in the battle against the queen. There had always been a chance one of us might die and leave the other behind.

"Nobles are supposed to stay engaged for a full year, right? I was afraid you might think spring was too early."

"*That* was what you were worried about?!"

"That was, in fact, what I was worried about," came his nonchalant reply. "But if we're married, you see, I can bring you to whatever functions or meetings I have to attend."

Was he really so loath to be apart, even for such short occasions? The thought was enough to make me downright bashful.

"Can you blame me? Men seem to take a liking to you quite easily. Even keeping you close by, there was *still* the constant risk of Wentworth stealing you away, and the moment I took my eyes off you, you got quite familiar with King Isaac, too," he murmured, his lips hovering just next to my ear. "I can never be too careful with you, can I?"

"Hold it, I didn't go around seducing them or anything! Besides, Sir Cain misread his own feelings in the first place, and he *knows* how I feel about you!"

"Sure, let's leave it at that. Either way, your willingness to be wed with such haste is quite the relief for me," he said with a laugh.



Ultimately, it took a full month before I could use enough magic to heal myself. That was still a month sooner than the Thorn Princess had predicted, however.

"Your mana levels simply aren't right, my child. And that's to say nothing of how resilient you are," she had commented.

"This disciple of mine's *always* been a weird one," had been Master Horace's rude reply.

Hey, what's so bad about being a little abnormal?! It just means I healed even faster!

Meanwhile, the nobility who had sided with Llewynne had made a show of their newfound allegiance by surrendering. In the face of their

pleas for mercy, Reggie had confiscated their territories and thrown the lot of them in prison. Of course, it wasn't like he had much of a choice. If he had let them run free, there was no telling which country they might have teamed up with to betray him next.

Now that those provinces had lost their rulers, they had been temporarily absorbed into the royal domain. Later on, they were to be divvied up among the various heroes of the war effort.

Another month later, Isaac, Gina, and Girsch all returned home to Salekhard. They had to make it back before the snow started coming down in earnest.

I said my goodbyes to Isaac, who had been staying at the royal palace in the interim, the day before he set out.

"I must admit I have my concerns about how you'll manage as a queen, but I'm glad you got your wish. Hang in there."

His pat on the head and words of encouragement were enough to make me blush.

Back in Trisphede, he had given up on me when he realized I was in love with Reggie. Considering he had been forced to watch his brother and Gina's relationship fall apart once before, he probably didn't want to see anything of the sort happen ever again.

"Thanks, Isaac. Take care of yourself."

We shook hands with a smile.

Unsurprisingly, Isaac wasn't going to be able to pop down to attend our springtime wedding. Salekhard was in fairly dire straits at the moment. The only reason he had stayed in Farzia as long as he had was to work out the details of our postwar agreement.

"She's a little on the smaller side, but I'm happy to see you found yourself a new mama, Kiara. If I ever have the chance, I'll zip down to say hi," Girsch said, giving me a pat on the head.

I couldn't thank Girsch enough for being such a wonderful mother figure to me. I doubted it was going to be that easy to come down and visit, though. Girsch was planning to go back into the mercenary business, so the only real opportunity to leave Salekhard would be for wars or conflicts. Still, I was no less pleased to hear those words.

"Thank you so much for everything. I hope with all my heart that we can meet again someday."

The mercenary gave several enthusiastic nods in response.

When it was my and Gina's turn to say goodbye, she wrapped me up in a big bear hug. "Thank you, Kiara. It's all thanks to you that I didn't have to give up on my love, and while you were at it, you even saved this idiot king of ours. I don't even know what to say, really—but no matter what happens, I'll always be on your side!"

At the declaration that another country's queen-to-be would always come first in her eyes, Isaac gave a dry little laugh in the

background. Gina was a woman of her word, so there was a good chance she meant every bit of it. I could already imagine her taking Isaac head-on, sword in hand and her frostfoxes at her side.

Of course, the man Gina held dear was a prince of Salekhard. Some situations were bound to come up where she couldn't put me first. I was pretty sure she had said it knowing that, however.

"Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment, really."

"I know. I'm going to come see you as soon as possible! There's a certain someone I need to introduce to you, too."

Based on that remark, I might be meeting her loved one sooner rather than later.

"Please do. I'll be waiting."



Once those goodbyes had been exchanged, the preparations for our rush-order wedding began.

By this point, Reggie's attendant, Mabel, had returned from her safe haven of Tarinahaea, so she was the one who ended up taking the reins on the project.

When she'd heard about Linessé the Clay Doll, she had gasped, wept, and—after a heart-to-heart about everything that had happened up until now—gone to work with such vigor that you would never have guessed her actual age.

In addition to preparing the cloth and gathering the seamstresses, we even called on expert designers, and soon the tailoring of the perfect dress to match Reggie's wedding regalia was underway. I was only shown the design and asked for my approval, making the whole ordeal a pretty laid-back experience for me.

From the very bottom of my heart, I was glad I had kept Linessé's soul in this world, even if it was only as a clay figurine. *Thank God she's here. I haven't the slightest clue what preparing for a wedding takes!*

In the meantime, I went to work repairing the walls around the royal capital. The citizens of the capital, including those who had just returned home after evacuating for the war, watched as I put their city back together, deeply touched by my handiwork.

During the snowy season, I helped sew the outfits. While I was checking other minor tasks off the list, I tried my hand at playing carpenter, too. Any parts of the royal palace that needed to be repaired or refurbished, I could fix up in the blink of an eye with my magic. The place was almost entirely made of stone, after all.

Aside from that, I took care of the various things I was told I should do before becoming queen: relearning the names of Farzia's nobility, reviewing proper etiquette, and so on.

At long last, spring rolled around.



Our wedding ceremony was held in a cathedral near the royal palace. It was a beautifully sunny day, so we rode in an open carriage.

I didn't feel the slightest bit nervous, mysteriously enough. The reason for that likely came down to the steed drawing our carriage: a certain giant goat I'd become very familiar with.

Obviously, that goat belonged to Lord Enister, who had come running as soon as he'd heard about our wedding. He had absolutely insisted on playing the role of usher, and he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Hardly any time has passed since we retook the royal capital," he had said. "I have no desire to just sit back and watch from the safety of the cathedral. I wish to protect His Majesty alongside my trusty steed."

Even his goat was dressed for the occasion, with a wreath of colorful flowers adorning its neck. For the record, Lord Enister was *also* wearing a garland on his head, which was so cute and surreal that it brought a smile to my face. It was very nice of him to wear it for us.

Each time I locked eyes with Reggie, I burst out giggling.

This was a king's wedding and all, so I'd always known that we couldn't just make it a laid-back ceremony for our closest friends. Seeing as I had feared this was going to be a much more formal, stuffy affair, I was very grateful for Lord Enister adding a dash of humor to the proceedings.

Reggie's royal guard was following behind our carriage. Groul and Felix trotted along on their horses, clad in dark military uniforms with their blue capes fluttering in the wind.

There were even more people lining the road of the royal capital than I had expected. Not everyone who had evacuated during the war had come home yet, but the city still looked bursting with life, all manner of people and things gathered for the occasion.

Before long, we arrived at the cathedral.

As I was about to step down from the carriage, Reggie—who had been the first to alight—said, "Come here, Kiara." Rather than simply offering me a hand, Reggie wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me down to the ground.

He gave me a squeeze around the hips, the train of my white dress dancing in the wind. This dress was what we had sewn during the winter. It was a gorgeous gown; layers of delicate lace ran from the chest to the waistline, with a myriad of pearls sewn into the fabric. A tiara made of silver and diamonds completed the look, along with a veil long enough to cover the hem of my dress.

I was glad that wearing a veil was a part of Farzian tradition, too.

Though I'd been informed it was a little old-fashioned, it was something I had always dreamed of wearing in my past life, so I had asked the seamstresses to make me one. Luckily enough, we had managed to get our hands on translucent and intricately patterned fabric of white lace.

More than anything, I was grateful to Reggie for encouraging me to go all out. Seeing as I would only be wearing this once in my entire life, he wanted to make sure I would have no regrets and thus had assured me I would be able to put everything I could possibly want in it.

I was also fortunate that the previous king of Farzia had been a bit of a cheapskate. He had hardly used up any of his fortune, and as soon as he had gone missing, his lords-in-waiting had taken it upon themselves to hide away some of his treasure. According to Reggie, it was all thanks to their quick thinking that the royal family hadn't ended up in any financial trouble. It helped that Queen Marianne hadn't been a particularly indulgent woman either, so she hadn't spent much of our funds prior to the war.

From the sound of it, Queen Marianne had never been very concerned with luxury. The only outfits she had ever worn were dark, modest, Llewynian-style dresses. The former king, who had died at her hands, had appreciated that quality of hers—simply because it meant she wouldn't waste money on frivolous accessories. It was a little depressing to think about.

As easy as it was to start focusing on the war, today of all days, I had to stop thinking back on the past.

I gazed over at Reggie once more. Today, he was clad in a military uniform more ornately embroidered than the one he had worn during the war. A sash hung from his shoulder, and he was wearing a long, crimson cloak that made him look the very picture of a king.

As he walked ahead, guiding me by the hand, he looked so nimble, handsome... and dependable. Honestly, he seemed so wonderful that it was enough to make me uneasy. Why would Reggie love someone like *me*? It was such a mystery to me.

My head filling up with worries it was far too late to be having, I finished climbing the stone steps of the cathedral. The knights of Évrard were lined up along either side of the enormous doors—big enough that I bet our whole carriage could have fit through.

As Reggie and I approached, they raised their swords overhead in unison. While we were making our way through the human tunnel, I spotted Cain toward the very back. Alan had stuck around in the royal palace to help Reggie, and Cain had been accompanying him for the duration of his stay.

After seeing through his decision to act as my older brother during

the war, he had continued to treat me like his little sister for the remainder of the winter, too. Even now, the look in his eyes softened when he saw me and Reggie standing side by side, the corners of his mouth turning up into a smile.

“Congratulations,” he murmured softly when we passed in front of him. I nodded back at him with a smile.

Once we had walked through the doors, the vast interior of the cathedral spread out before us. The resplendent sanctuary was furnished with rows of pillars along the sides. Down the center ran a brilliant red carpet. Along either side of it stood those who had come to give us their blessing.

In the front row were Lord and Lady Évrard, my and Reggie’s closest living relatives. Standing beside Alan were our other companions who had fought alongside us: Jerome, Emmeline, and Edam. To top it off, Lady Évrard was cradling the Thorn Princess in her arms, while Alan held onto Master Horace.

I was truly glad that Master Horace could be here, as was I delighted to see Reggie’s mother attending her son’s wedding ceremony. Though... I did feel kind of bad for the rest of the nobility, who seemed put off by all the weird dolls hanging around. There were plenty of other nobles who had traveled from their territories to attend the king’s wedding, too.

I walked past all my friends, who were watching over me with smiles on their faces, and eventually arrived before the altar. Awaiting us there was the archbishop, an elderly man with white eyebrows, dressed in white robes and a hat embroidered with gold. The clergyman began reading off verses on marriage from the scripture. When he was done, he offered me and Reggie congratulations and prompted us to exchange our vows.

I turned to Reggie once more. He lifted the front of my veil, revealing my face underneath. Perhaps because I’d been wearing the veil this whole time, it was almost discomfiting to see him peering directly into my face. For once in my life, I was all dolled up in makeup, but that just left me to worry about whether it had started coming off over the course of the day.

“Um, Reggie...”

Do I look weird? I wanted to say, but there was no time for the words to leave my mouth.

Reggie placed a brief kiss on my lips before pulling back. It was already over by the time my eyes had gone wide, leaving it feeling almost like an anticlimax.

With a tiny laugh, he said, “You always look cute in my eyes, Kiara. There really isn’t anything for you to worry about... but I don’t want the masses to see what your face looks like when I kiss you,

either.”

His explanation for why he’d gotten it over with so quickly only served to make my face heat up further. I could hardly believe I was going to spend my life with someone who loved me so much. As late in the game as it was to be thinking it, I felt truly proud that I had kept him alive to see today.

At that, the archbishop declared us husband and wife. The congratulatory shouts and applause of the audience echoed throughout the cathedral.

With that, Reggie and I began our walk to the cathedral doors. Showered in petals by the attendees as we passed them by, we stepped out under the blue sky.



The day I had fully remembered my past life and made up my mind to run away, I never could have imagined that this was the future that awaited me. I had been fully prepared to live out the rest of my life in solitude.

Yet now there were so many people willing to support me and watch over me, and I had met someone with whom I could hold hands and walk side by side.

The thought made me deliriously happy. The moment we got back inside our carriage—though I kept my voice to a whisper—I couldn’t help myself from saying, “Reggie... I love you so much.”

When I looked back at Reggie, I was shocked to see him avoiding my gaze, a shy look crossing his face. He gripped me by the hand and murmured, “It’s not fair for you to say that *here*. Make sure you say it again later tonight, will you?”

It was so rare to see Reggie flustered that I couldn’t help but laugh.

In that moment, I hadn’t the slightest doubt in my mind that we would be smiling and laughing like this for the rest of our lives.



Side Story: The Happily Ever After Continues

Marriage. As a girl, it was something I had always dreamed of.

To my good fortune, I had met a man I loved. What's more, he had returned my feelings. The pair of us had made it through a war alive, and we'd even managed to hold a proper wedding ceremony.

All that said... though married life itself was going smoothly, I was having trouble adjusting to my new position as the queen.

I never let my mother-in-law, Linessa, out of my grasp. *Save me, Mother!* I had wailed more than once, weeping and hugging her behind the scenes.

Mabel, who had finally returned to her post and was now looking after me as an attendant, had admonished me in hushed tones. "I must say, the way you're always hugging that doll of yours isn't the best for your public image." Ever since then, I had to ask Mabel to hold the doll and stand next to me instead.

I didn't really want to let her out of my grasp, though. Every time I had to receive someone as the queen, I thought I was going to have a mental breakdown.

Thanks to the help of my two assistants, I've managed to fake it 'til I make it... but I'm REALLY sorry, there's no way I'm going to remember the faces of all these people I just met!

Even back when I was an adoptive daughter of the count, I rarely ventured out into high society, and I had never once been to the royal palace. That meant that I didn't recognize a single one of the nobles who had come to the palace for a courtesy call—and *that* meant that I'd had no choice but to start memorizing their names from scratch.

When I broke down crying, Mother had said, "Take it slow. When I first started out, everything went in one ear and out the other. Until you can remember for yourself, just rely on the good memories of those around you, or those already acquainted with your guest."

After that, I chose to focus on memorizing what they talked about instead, then match that information to a name and face later on. Thankfully, so long as I had Mother and Mabel around, I was able to keep tabs on at least *some* of the people.

Above all else, the fact that Reggie had brought Mabel back to the palace so fast had really saved my hide. She knew the faces of those who came in and out of the royal palace better than anyone.

Oh, but I at least knew the faces of the people who fought in the war against Llewynne, so all I had to memorize was their names.

In that regard, I was truly glad I had joined the war effort. Anyone who was part of the fight regarded me much more warmly, too, which made it easier to get my foot in the door.

When I said as much to Alan, he replied, “No, I’m pretty sure they’re just afraid of your magic. They’re grateful to you, sure, but it’s no different from fearful reverence.”

“Great. Thanks for the honesty, Alan.”

I was beyond bummed to hear that I was basically ruling with an iron fist. To be fair, it was better than having *them* pick on *me*, so maybe I was better off accepting it.

“Sure. If nothing else, no one who fought in the war will do you any harm for as long as they live. Good news, isn’t it?” he offered with a pleasant smile. I gave him a listless quirk of my lips in return.

Well, it’s good that I have fewer people to watch out for, I guess?

“As for anyone who evacuated the palace and is consequently less familiar with you, you’ll just have to treat them to a show of your magic. It’ll keep things simple.”

“I’m not sure you ought to be endorsing intimidation tactics, Lord Alan,” said reliable old Mabel, putting on the brakes for us.

True enough, it probably wasn’t a very queenly way of doing things. Besides, if I ever found myself in a situation where I *couldn’t* use magic, I’d be in serious danger of an assassination attempt.

“I’m just being honest. Besides, it doesn’t have to be a show of *violence*. You could repair or make something instead. Considering that Farzia’s power as a nation is currently in decline, wouldn’t it be better for its queen to give off an impression of strength?”

It seemed Mabel had to acknowledge what Alan was getting at. “I suppose so. His Majesty is a clever boy, but some things are simply out of his hands. In some ways, I believe it’s a good thing he married a spellcaster like Her Majesty; it has helped bolster Farzia’s image.”

“When it comes to intimidation tactics, she’s the perfect woman for the job.”

Intimidation? Ugh.

In my past life, I certainly wouldn’t have been happy to hear, *If you get married, you’ll make a great military asset!* Of course, I’d heard it enough times prior to our wedding that I was already used to it. It still felt like hollow praise, though.

No, c’mon now... As long as it helps Reggie, I should be happy about it.

If we came across as a weakened nation, there was a good chance more countries than just Llewynne would come start a fight. I heard that even our own ally, Erendor, was liable to start shoving unreasonable demands into our negotiations if we looked too

vulnerable. Either way, we already owed Erendor far too many debts. They had helped us out quite a bit with deterring Llewyn, after all.

“Let’s take things one step at a time, Your Majesty. There’s no need to be in such a hurry.” Mabel rushed to neatly tie the conversation up.

Speaking of taking things too fast, there was a certain issue that had come to my attention ever since we’d gotten married.

That evening, we were to host a fairly modest party, so I went to go get changed. Reggie just so happened to pop up in the midst of my preparations.

It seemed he had arrived right on time for me to have just finished getting dressed. That only served to make him *less* patient, however, and he opened up the door without the slightest hesitation. “Are you ready?”

When they saw that Reggie had come to fetch me, the servants changing my clothes and putting up my hair went into a tizzy. If nothing else, however—perhaps because this had already happened several times in the past month—none of them dropped what they were holding in shock.

My heart had gone out to them back when they felt the need to apologize profusely, so I was glad to see they had gotten used to it by now.

I mean, it would be best if Reggie didn’t make these surprise appearances at all, but I’m only just learning how impatient he can be... or maybe I just never paid much attention to it before.

“Yes, I’ve just—”

Right as I was about to say “finished up,” Mabel cut me off. “It wouldn’t do for you to become as impatient as His Majesty, ma’am. I must ask that you wait a little longer as well, sire.”

Looking disappointed but resigned, Reggie saw himself out of the room for the time being. I failed to hold back a giggle.

Come to think of it, back when we decided to rush ahead with the wedding, Mabel advised us against that, too.

Indeed, she had warned us not to take things too fast.



I thought back on the events of several months ago.

At the time, I had been so overjoyed to be getting married so soon that I hadn’t thought twice about it. After all, it meant we could spend even more time together without concern for the public eye. I had been afraid that if we were merely courting each other, we wouldn’t actually get to see each other too often.

That had been a slight miscalculation on my part, however. After formally announcing my position as his fiancée, I was no longer able

to go see Reggie at my leisure. Things were different now that we were no longer at war, and I was expected to behave like a proper daughter of nobility.

Mabel had advised me to send one of my attendants to request a meeting, and then and only then was I allowed to go see him. Since we no longer held the tenuous relationship status of “lovers,” we were allowed to be seen together in public places, but our interactions always felt stiff and formal under the circumstances.

Mabel had explained that all this ceremony wasn’t for Reggie’s sake, but for mine. The nobles who came and went from the royal palace expected us to adhere to custom. Those were merely rules of their own making, yes, but if I got myself expelled from their inner circle from the word go, it would make it a lot harder to operate when I became queen—or at least, that was what she had to say on the matter.

“It’s alright to change the way things are done, but that has to wait until *after* they’ve accepted you. It’s much safer to trick them into thinking you’re their friend, then try to change things from the inside.”

“*Trick* them?”

That choice of words made me a bit uncomfortable. Perhaps Reggie’s penchant for dropping scathing comments so flippantly was because Mabel had rubbed off on him.

Of course, that *was* the most efficient way to do things. Maybe I just had to accept that this was what noble society was like.

Sure enough, clay-Linesse got a word in edgewise. “That’s a very straightforward way to explain it, Mabel, but don’t you think it sounds a little *too* calculating?”

“Not at all, Lady Linesse. I think it would behoove Lady Kiara to approach things from this perspective,” she bluntly asserted. “Humans are quick to forget, after all. Now that everyone’s memories of the war are fresh in their minds, they fear and respect her, yes. However, once enough time has passed since we’ve returned to our old ways of life, everyone will forget about these tough times and go back to judging others by the rules they’ve devised. When that time comes, if Lady Kiara tries to break those rules from the outside... it will spell trouble for her down the line.”

It seemed that Linesse couldn’t find it in her to argue with that assertion. When he saw her lapse into silence, Master Horace started snickering.

“This mentor of yours is infuriating beyond belief,” Linesse griped, which only drew more and more laughter from the subject of her indignation.



While I was caught up in my memory, the servants had finished touching me up.

Reggie reentered the room with Mabel's permission, then pulled me into a hug as I rose to my feet. "You look beautiful, Kiara."

"Uhh, err... Thanks, Reggie."

Considering all the servants were still hanging around, not to mention my mother-in-law was right there watching us, I wasn't sure how to react. As a result, the words left my mouth in a jumble.

Perhaps because this had become standard practice as of late, however, Linesse only grumbled to herself. "Goodness, the honeymoon period is lasting quite a while with these two. Why, I never imagined my own son would grow up like this."

"Hah! You can only say that because you always had your hands full during the war. Every time we had a spare moment to breathe, these two would start flirting right in front of me. It wore me out real fast, let me tell you."

"I almost feel a little guilty, to be honest."

"Oh, don't get so down on yourself! You barely played a part in bringing him up, right?"

"But it could be hereditary, couldn't it? His father had similar tendencies."

"Aha," Master Horace said with a sage nod, and the pair heaved deep, resigned sighs.

Watching the two of them acting like a couple of old friends was almost enough to make me giggle. I could tell Reggie's heart was warmed by the exchange, too.

It wasn't long before our time was up. I cradled Linesse in my arms, asking Mabel to hold Master Horace for me. Mabel couldn't always tag along when I was acting independently, which was why I would be carrying Linesse myself tonight.

With that, we headed for the party venue.

The royal palace was huge. We had several different halls for hosting parties. It was still easy for me to get lost, so I was afraid to walk anywhere on my own.

I followed the lord-in-waiting escorting us into the hall. There, in the vast space lined with seats for partaking in the feast, nobles had gathered for the party. The ones who were already acquainted with me made no comment on my appearance, while the ones who didn't know about my habit of walking around holding a bizarre clay doll looked positively startled.

Oh, this is kind of convenient.

It sure was making it easy to tell which people I hadn't met

before, or else had only met once.

Reggie and I took our seat at a large, U-shaped table set up in the center of the hall. We *were* the king and queen, after all.

The party was being held to celebrate the return of the king's magistrates, who had been traveling around to check on the state of each province since spring and had just now come home to give their reports. As such, the magistrates and their families—as well as their more distant relatives and the various nobles staying in the royal capital—were all in attendance.

Before everyone took their seats, they lined up a fair distance from our table to greet us. Among them were a good number of noble daughters of marriageable age—probably here to either size up a potential fiancé or else attract someone new. That said, a large percentage of them seemed to be falling for Reggie at a first glance.

Ah well. Can't blame them, I thought to myself.

Reggie always behaved quite amiably in these scenarios, and he was certainly handsome enough to merit the infatuation. Still, I wished they would stop casting *me* dubious glances on the side.

It hadn't happened too often on the heels of our wedding, but lately, this sort of thing was becoming more and more common. For a daughter of nobility sheltered in the depths of her mansion—let alone one from a province far removed from the fires of war—perhaps the conflict with Llewynne had seemed like little more than the events of a far-off world.

Surely they were all thinking, *I heard all these awesome stories about this girl being a spellcaster, sure, but she wasn't even born into nobility, was she?*

That made me think back to Mabel's apprehensions, and it made me realize just how right she might have been. That said, there was nothing to do but keep my mouth shut and behave myself. It wasn't as though they were doing anything worse than casting unimpressed looks my way, anyway.

After dinner, we held a ball in the open space of the hall. The elderly folks, Reggie, and I all remained seated, watching the dance from our chairs.

Nevertheless, an endless flow of women came to ask Reggie to dance. It was almost funny how many of them popped up one after the other. And it wasn't just *them*, either. Even the girls' fathers stopped by under the pretext of greeting the king. It was impressive.

Reggie turned them all down quite decisively, but they still wouldn't give up. Watching their aggressive attempts to woo him almost reminded me of Ada.

Ada was currently staying with the House of Delphion and serving as an attendant to Lucille, who had been adopted by the new baron.

Based on what I'd heard, she had made a good living for herself, and seeing as she could double as a bodyguard for both Lucille and the baron himself, they were more than happy to have her. Delphion had taken quite a hit from Llewyn's occupation, plus they had shed a fair number of soldiers in the following expeditions to Trisphede and the royal capital, so they needed all the firepower they could get.

Emmeline was attending today's party, so I was hoping I might get the chance to talk to her and hear about how things were going. It was as that thought ran through my head that the girls standing beside Reggie shot me horrified looks.

Uh, what? Did I do something wrong?

"Kiara... I'm betting your laugh gave them a fright," Linessé whispered.

Oh, crap. It just slipped out when I was envisioning my conversation with Emmeline. Now what do I do?! It's not like I'm trying to pick a fight with them. Gosh, things are so much easier when I can just whip out some magic and settle things that way!

I'd interacted with other girls my age back at the boarding school, but it wasn't as if I'd had a vast network of friends. That was before I had fully remembered my past life, and I knew my stepmother had sold me off to become the count's adoptive daughter, so I was a pretty gloomy, fatalistic girl at the time. What's more, there weren't all that many high-ranking daughters of nobility attending the school, so I wasn't sure if I should talk to these purebred noblewomen the same way as my old peers.

That was when Reggie stood up and held out a hand for me. "Why let this opportunity go to waste? It wouldn't do for the king and queen to sit the ball out, so let's share at least one dance."

At his invitation, I handed Linessé over to Mabel, who had been waiting behind me, and rose to my feet.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the moment we inserted ourselves into the circle of dancers, we drew everyone's attention. I could practically feel all those rebuffed noblewomen glaring holes into me. No doubt they were just waiting for me to slip up.

Fortunately, I had gone through an intensive dancing course during the winter. I was good enough to trick any bystanders into believing I knew what I was doing, at least.

Way back when, Reggie grabbing me by the hand like this would have been enough to leave me a flustered mess, but now it only reassured me that I wasn't alone. Once we started dancing, I knew he would cover for any of my own deficiencies.

As his way of telling those watching that I was his one and only, he made a show of whispering in my ear when we were done with our dance.

The actual contents of his murmurings, however, were nothing out of the ordinary. "I'll see you later. Your friend is here today, so you should go make the most of it."

With that, he let go of my hand and took a step back. No sooner had he backed away than Emmeline rushed up to take his place.

"Good evening, Your Majesty."

"Miss Emmeline!"

I shook her hand without a moment's hesitation. When he saw that, Reggie gave Emmeline a small wave before returning to his seat.

After that, I talked with Emmeline about all manner of topics. When I asked her what she was currently up to, she told me that she was helping to govern Trisphede while assisting in running her own territory on the side. Nearly all of Lord Trisphede's family had been murdered, and his only surviving daughter had since been adopted into another noble family, so a member of a branch family had been selected as his successor in a hurry.

There had initially been plans to bring the province under the direct control of the royal family, but taking our reconciliation with Salekhard into account, we'd decided that restoring the House of Trisphede would serve to better placate both its citizens and the branch families governing the different regions of the province.

The new count of Trisphede had never had a hand in ruling an entire province before. The former baron of Delphion, Henry, had made the journey over to provide him with support, and apparently Reggie had deployed a magistrate there as well.

"That must be hectic."

"A bit. I prefer to keep busy, however, and the forests of Trisphede make for a splendid hunting ground." She said that with the most brilliant of smiles, so I could tell that she had loved the chance to hunt to her heart's content.

"How's Lucille? And what about Miss Ada? I heard she's working as Lucille's attendant now."

Emmeline flashed a wry smile. "I must say, Miss Ada has undergone quite the shocking transformation."

"Huh?"

"She's Lucille's tutor now. I was stunned to see how quickly she turned strict the moment she got started."

Seeing as Lucille wasn't old enough to attend boarding school yet, as the baron's daughter, she was to study under a private tutor. Plus, there was talk of Delphion being elevated to a dukedom around the same time as Trisphede's conferral ceremony, so a good education was more vital than ever.

However, the entirety of Delphion had been ravaged by war. Any tutor who had been summoned from an outside territory had long

since fled, and there was no telling where they were now. Finding a tutor from within the province itself was going to take a while, so it was determined that Ada would take over her instruction in the interim.

From the sound of it, she had been unexpectedly suited to the role, and she was now well on her way to becoming one stickler of a teacher.

“She’s changed the way she dresses, too. These days, she wears nothing but clothes that keep her covered up from head to toe. Because that was the way her own tutor dressed, perhaps?”

“Now *that’s* a surprise.”

I was glad to hear she was doing well, though. If she hadn’t fit in at Delphion either, arranging for Évrard to take her in would have been the only option we had left.

“That aside, I see your marriage has made him even more brazen,” Emmeline remarked with a sigh.

“Huh? Who?”

“His Majesty. In the past, he held back from showing off *too* much—though he was always quite indulgent when it came to you, and he would hang around you every chance he could get.”

“I mean... I guess?” I faltered precisely because I knew exactly what she was talking about—particularly when it came to the latter half of our premarital relationship. Every time we had laid eyes on each other, he would reach out to hold my hand. He’d hugged me all the time, too.

“I tried making a bet with Gina about whether marriage would only make him more incorrigible.”

Wait, you were talking about this stuff with Gina behind my back?!

“Sadly, she *also* wanted to take the side that he would just get worse, so the wager didn’t pan out.”

I had no words.

“Things turned out just as we suspected, I see. The moment he knew you were his, it just encouraged him to hold you even closer. Why, he won’t even let you out of his sight, almost like a mother bird sitting on her eggs.”

Apparently, both Emmeline and Gina thought of Reggie like an overprotective mama bird. That wasn’t really *too* surprising, all told.

“That does explain why you never get jealous. There’s a chance others may get jealous of *you*, however, so do watch yourself. Once a bit more time has passed, you’ll be acting alone more and more frequently, too.”

“I know. I’m being careful.”

Mabel and Linesse, who had been through similar troubles during Linesse’s time as queen, had issued me a similar warning.

“Then again, I’m sure His Majesty will take care to eliminate anyone who merits that sort of caution.”

“Oh, c’mon. Reggie wouldn’t go *that* far.”

King or no, I’d like to believe he wouldn’t have someone exiled just for picking on me a bit.

Just as I was about to tell her she was exaggerating, Emmeline shook her head. “His Majesty’s mother went through untold hardship for that exact reason, did she not? He himself suffered under the cold gazes and attitudes of those around him, as well. I’d wager he’s quite unforgiving when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“Ah... Maybe so.”

I knew Reggie was that sort of person. Heck, if I ever saw anyone else giving *him* a hard time, I would be furious, too. If I was there to witness it, no doubt I would go threaten the living daylights out of his persecutor.

When I thought about it like that, it was a whole lot easier to understand—and I was delighted to realize he was thinking of himself just as much as he thought of me.



“You did well today, Kiara.”

I had bowed out of the party a bit early and asked the servants to ready the bed and my nightclothes for me. Having changed into casual wear himself, Reggie called out to me upon opening up the inner door that led from his chambers to mine.

“Same to you, Reggie.”

I was glad these little exchanges had become customary for us, but considering I had been impolitely stretching my legs over the sofa when he came in, I rushed to sit upright.

“Are your feet tired? No need to mind me.”

“You *say* that, but...”

We’d only been seeing each other for a few months in total. It had only been *one* month since we’d gotten married, to boot. I’d gotten used to being around him all the time, but I still had some lingering desire to keep up appearances. I definitely didn’t want him to see me looking like a slob, at least. Luckily for me, though, it just seemed to amuse him more than anything.

Reggie came over to my side. Once he’d taken a seat next to me, he unceremoniously lifted up one of my legs.

“Huh?! What are you doing?!”

“Shh,” he hushed me, placing my foot atop his lap and going to work massaging my calf.

God, that feels good! I thought, steadily relaxing into the gentle comfort.

"I'm so glad I married you."

"*This* is what makes you think that?"

"I mean, if we hadn't gotten married, I wouldn't have a king rubbing my feet right now!"

Up until now, we had spent most of our time in battle or on our wartime travels. The regulations had consequently been much more lax than normal, which was the only reason we'd been allowed to stay in the same room alone together. In a normal relationship between royalty and a daughter of nobility, however, it would have been out of the question for us to be alone together, let alone touching each other's feet.

"You always think the strangest things." He chuckled. "Normally, that's where you'd say something like, 'I would have hated being away from you for even a second.'"

"I mean, I *would* hate that!" I insisted. "I mean it!"

Reggie took his hand from my foot to give me a pat on the head. "Yes, yes. You get lonely so easily, I know. Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere."

"In that case, if you have to go out to battle again, don't you dare try to leave me behind this time."

I hadn't forgotten our disagreement in Évrard, or the time he had left me behind during the Battle of Cassia. I wanted him to promise me he wouldn't pull that on me again.

"I won't."

He smiled, kissed me on the cheek, and lifted my hand to place yet another kiss on the ring I was wearing.

"Really?" I asked to be extra sure.

Reggie nodded. "I promise."

He made good on that promise before long—when we set out to raid the Kingdom of Llewyn.

Instead of leaving me behind, however, he ended up sending me home partway through. The reason he gave me for his decision was, "I kept my promise to bring you along, but I never said I would take the little one in your belly along for the remainder of the ride." Frankly, it was hard to argue with that logic.

Though I was faced with such quandaries every now and then, my life went on.

There were some tough times along the way, but I'm truly glad I was reborn. I planned to do my best to make that statement ring true for the rest of my life—alongside my beloved, my companions, and my new family who would soon be born into this world.

Afterword

Kanata Satsuki here! Thank you for reading *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!* 6. This sixth volume marks the final entry in the *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!* series.

Here, we get the solution to one of the biggest mysteries of the series: why does Kiara possess memories of her past life? We also get some answers regarding the Thorn Princess, whose entire existence has been one big enigma. The end of the fight against the queen unfolds in this volume, too. Here's hoping you all walked away satisfied with the conclusions to these various threads.

This time around, the side story follows the main couple's life after the ending. Just because their new life together is a peaceful one doesn't mean they don't have plenty else on their plate. All the same, I hope you had fun reading about their happy future together.

It's truly all thanks to my faithful readers that I was able to write the series to its completion. I can't thank you enough for sticking with me until the end.

Looking back on it now, writing my very first war story was one heck of an undertaking. I've read a lot of similar stories on my own time, but when it came to writing one myself, each update felt like an experiment I couldn't afford to mess up.

Your author here has a penchant for going against the norm, which is why the main character didn't end up playing the role of a strategist. I thought it would be nice to let a girl go out onto the battlefield and fight for once. Of course, that ended up forcing me to write battle scenes in pretty vivid detail, which might have been the most stressful part of writing this entire series for me.

Also, if I made Kiara too strong, Reggie and Cain would have nothing to do but tag along after her, so I made sure to put some limits on her powers purely to give them a chance to shine. For the most part, however, I spent this series writing whatever struck me—for example, turning Master Horace into a clay doll on a pure whim of mine. As a result, I came away pretty attached to this particular work.

When it came time to wrap up the story, rather than a sense of accomplishment, I felt a bit melancholy that it had to come to an end. I'm still feeling a little blue, so both prior to and after the publication of this volume, I plan to post more epilogue stories on the *Shousetsuka ni Narou* website. One of them will be about Alan's engagement,

which I couldn't fit into the main story. (I hope you're all sufficiently surprised by how he ends up tying the knot! I was laughing the whole time I was writing it.) Another one I want to write is about Reggie and the Thorn Princess's talk just after the final battle, and there's also the story of the person who made the RPG in Kiara's past life. (I alluded to him in the side story of the previous volume, but as it turns out, there's one more member of the cast who was reincarnated in a parallel world.)

Precisely because this was such a long-running series, I bet you're all curious to know what happens after the end. I hope you enjoy the extra stories.

I decided on the cover of this volume a pretty long time ago: it's the main couple at their wedding ceremony! I asked for it knowing it would give off big "finale" vibes, but the moment I actually saw the artwork, I couldn't stop squealing. They look so happy together, and you can tell the story will have a happy ending just from looking at the cover! I love it!

The color illustration is the couple and their two dolls. I'd vaguely settled on this one ahead of time, too. I wanted to see the Thorn Princess's Kofun-style figure in color, as well as the surreal sight of Reggie holding her in his arms. There were a lot of different desires tangled up in that particular choice.

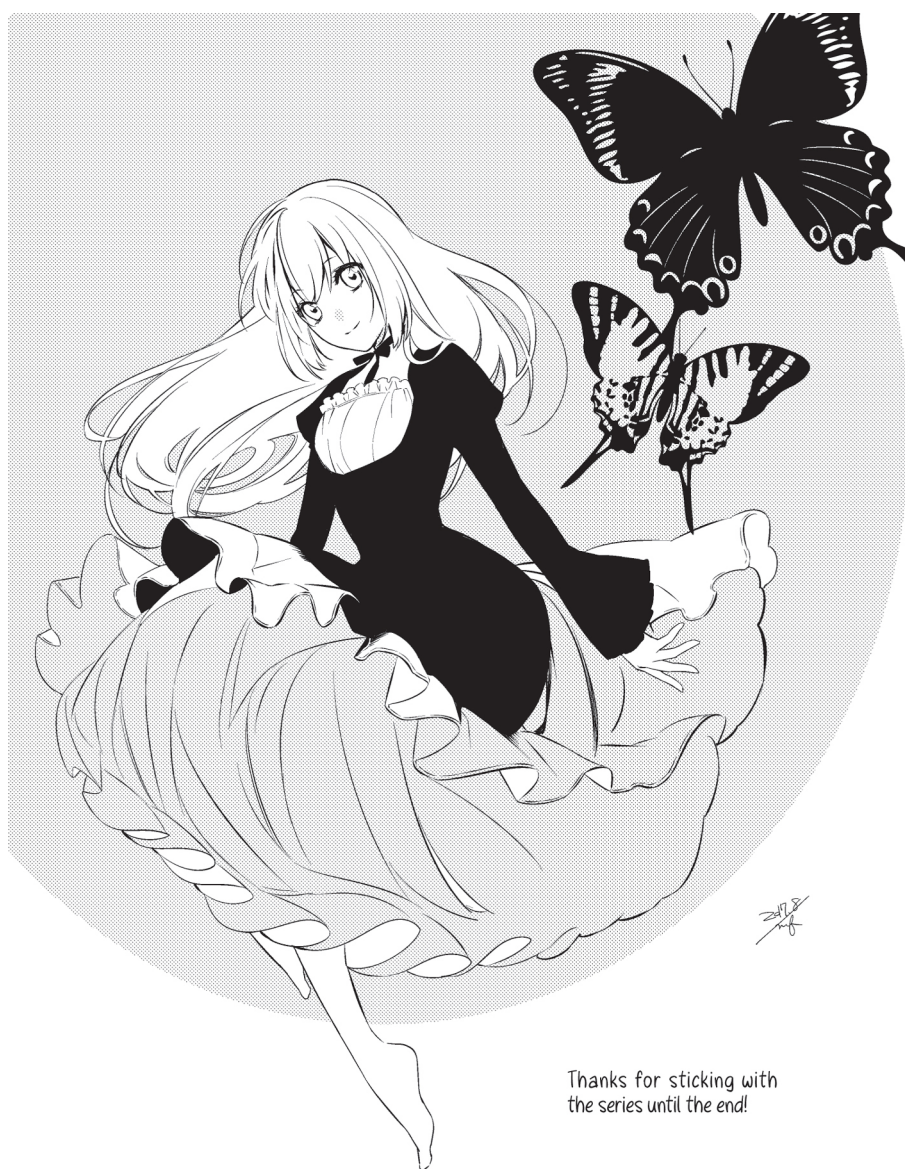
My artist draws such cool-looking art, yet here I was always making her draw weird prehistoric clay dolls and the like! I am both terribly sorry and eternally grateful to Mitsuya Fuji, to the point where I don't even know how to thank her. Thank you so much for everything!

Finally, I'd like to thank my wonderful editor, who pulled out all the stops to make this book a reality, as well as the editing department at Shufu to Seikatsu Sha. When we first met, I said, "I want to see the full series published!" I'm beyond ecstatic that that wish became a reality! Also, I still have fond memories of the time no one realized I'd been published by a different company and started frantically looking it up on their phones all at once.

I'm grateful to the proofreaders, the printers, and everyone else who helped get this book published—and above all else, to all my dear readers who chose to pick up this book.

I sincerely hope that, through the medium of literature, our paths will cross once more.

—Kanata Satsuki, August 2017



2013/8/16

Thanks for sticking with
the series until the end!

Bonus Short Story

Another Reason I'm Glad I Married You

It was only just recently that Reggie had learned that his mother was still alive. The one to inform him had been Kiara, immediately following their victory over the queen.

No sooner had he learned the truth about his mother, however, than she gave up her life to save Kiara. Reggie had never been less sure of what to do than in that moment.

When he was on the verge of losing Kiara, he had felt as though his world had come crashing down around him. He could hardly believe it when he'd heard there was a way to save her, and he had refused to leave her side until the moment she opened her eyes again.

It was then that Kiara had revealed that the Thorn Princess was his mother. *Is she delirious?* he had wondered for a fleeting moment. However, Kiara blowing the dying woman's cover and storing her soul—if nothing else—inside a doll had given him a chance to talk to her and learn the truth. She was, without a doubt, his real mother.

“Your father wasn't exactly the most thorough man. As accomplished as he was, he had his blind spots when it came to showing consideration for others, which led him to aggravate his brother's inferiority complex time and time again,” the other figurine had reflected with a deep sigh.

She was posed strangely, one hand raised and the other one lowered, and her eyes and mouth were just little round holes. His mother's new look was certainly odd, but also endearing... or that was Reggie's opinion, at least. He *had* found it uncanny at first, but he wasn't about to tell Kiara that.

As of late, his mother would start reminiscing about the past whenever they were together. Apparently, Reggie's grandfather had been so horrible to her that she'd hesitated to so much as speak to him. She had found his uncle downright personable by comparison.

Reggie could understand parts of what she was saying. His uncle's attitude toward him had taken a dramatic turn for the worse upon becoming his adoptive father. Prior to that, Reggie didn't recall him ever doing anything quite as egregious as picking on a young child.

When Reggie asked what the man had been like before getting more deeply involved in his life, he found out his uncle had spent his time picking fights with his father. According to his mother, his father

had been the greatest source of the man's inferiority complex, so that didn't come as too much of a surprise. Of course, the passing of his rival had led to his second biggest insecurity becoming his new adoptive son, and thus all that animosity had been directed at Reggie instead.

Though it all made sense, that didn't mean he was about to forgive the man. Despite the slipshod burial Queen Marianne had given him, Reggie therefore considered the book closed on the man's funeral—his excuse being that they were in the midst of a war. There was no need to make a big occasion of his death all over again.

When he had informed Kiara and his mother of his decision, they had both made the exact same comment: "Too much hassle?" And in unison, to boot.

Perhaps my mother and Kiara are two incredibly like-minded individuals? As Reggie started to consider it, he asked Groul for his opinion.

"Would you say that Kiara and my mother have a lot in common?"

Groul gazed back at Reggie as if he'd just witnessed the most heartwarming sight. "That's a fairly common phenomenon, Your Majesty. I wouldn't let it get to you."

For whatever reason, his knight encouraged him not to stress about it. Not that he had been *worried* about it in the first place.

That was when Felix, who was also present, inserted himself into the conversation. "What do you mean?"

"Men have a tendency to go after women who resemble their mothers. Aha... Now I get it. Back in the beginning, I did wonder why Your Majesty had chosen Lady Kiara of all people. That's one mystery solved."

That comment brought a smile to Felix's face as well. Though Reggie knew this was indeed a universal phenomenon, he didn't appreciate his knights looking at him like he was some kind of child.

"And what about you, Groul? Would you say your wife bears a resemblance to *your* mother?" he shot back.

Groul immediately averted his gaze. "Well... I suppose you *could* say that, yes."

"I do recall Commander Groul describing it as being bombarded with the same complaints from all sides," Felix teased him. From the sound of it, his wife and his mother were always at odds with each other.

Having recalled the predicament for himself, Groul heaved a deep sigh. "Their similarities only serve to sow the seeds of strife, I suppose. In that regard, I'm almost jealous that the ladies in your life get along so well, Your Majesty."

True enough. I've never once seen a fight break out between the two of them, Reggie thought to himself.



The following day, Reggie bore witness to Kiara's dependence on his mother, watching her wail "Oh, Mother!" every other word while tearfully clinging to her and refusing to let go. By the end of the day, she even told him, "I'm sorry for hogging your mom all to myself," offering to hand her over to him whenever there wasn't official business to be taken care of. She sounded terribly guilty about it, too.

His mother, in her bizarre clay doll form, didn't seem to think there was a pressing need for her to see Reggie every single day. Exasperated, she said, "There's nothing to apologize for, Kiara."

"But I bet Reggie wants a chance to talk with you, too."

That reply left his mother stuck for a response.

Each time Reggie saw one of their little exchanges, he felt something frozen deep in his heart begin to thaw. After all that time he'd spent convincing himself that he had been abandoned as a sort of coping mechanism... no doubt the vestiges of that still lingered somewhere in his heart.

And so, when he took his mother out of Kiara's hands, he gave her a pat on the head and said, "I'm so glad I married you."



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by Kanata Satsuki

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